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## **Risk on Repeat: A Critical Analysis of Dyfed-Powys Police's Risk Assessment Process for Repeat Missing Children**

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## Abstract

This research examines the effectiveness of Dyfed-Powys Police's (DPP) current risk assessment process for missing persons, with a particular focus on repeat missing children. The study was motivated by increasing missing person demand and finite resources, meaning police forces have to consider how efficient current processes are.

Objectives included mapping DPP's existing risk assessment procedures (in comparison with other forces), reviewing relevant academic literature, analysing DPP's current risk assessment process, and recommending improvements to enhance the process.

The study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy, recognising the practical nature of policing problems and allowing a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was implemented. The methodology combined thematic document analysis of missing person policies from all four Welsh police forces. For the primary research an online questionnaire survey was distributed to operational staff (including response supervisors and Force Incident Managers) gathering quantitative data on tools, training, and attitudes, alongside qualitative comments. This questionnaire incorporated scenario-based questions to test whether knowledge of prior missing episodes influenced risk grading decisions. Then, semi-structured interviews with Force Incident Managers were carried out to add context to the uncovered themes.

Key findings reveal notable inconsistencies and areas of concern in the current process. The policy review confirmed that despite a national framework, approaches to missing child risk assessment vary. DPP policy prohibits classifying anyone under-18 as low risk (mandating at least a medium risk grading), whereas other forces have more flexible grading policies. Frontline feedback indicated that treating every missing child as medium or high risk can lead to over-classification in situations objectively posing minimal risk potentially diluting attention and causing officers to become desensitised to repeat cases. The scenario-based experiment demonstrated a desensitisation effect: in most paired scenarios, a child with prior

missing incidents was given a lower risk grading than an identical first-time missing child, despite identical circumstances. Another significant finding was gaps in training. Many officers conducting or supervising risk assessments had little or no formal training in the process. This lack of training corresponded with variable understanding of policy. The study also uncovered that information sharing with partners is suboptimal. Force Incident Managers reported difficulty accessing crucial background information held by partner agencies, especially for children in care. This indicates breakdowns in multi-agency communication, undermining risk assessments when police lack details that social services or care homes hold.

These findings point to a process that, while well-intentioned and broadly in line with national standards, suffers from inconsistency, potential underestimation of risk in repeat cases, and inefficiencies due to information silos and uneven expertise.

The research carries important implications for police practice and policy. First, it underlines the need for enhanced training and clear guidance for those assessing risk. Second, the findings support refining the risk assessment model itself. Third, strengthening multi-agency partnerships is crucial. The effective use of information from schools, social services, and care homes (such as fully implementing the Child Information Form across the force) would give officers a fuller picture of a child's vulnerabilities and history at the point of risk assessment

In conclusion, this research highlights that some improvements are needed to address desensitisation towards repeat missing children, training deficiencies, and inconsistent risk grading. By adopting a more nuanced and evidence-informed risk assessment model, bolstering officer training, and enhancing partnership practices, DPP can better safeguard repeat missing children. This study's insights are intended to inform DPP and the wider UK policing community in refining missing person risk assessments, ultimately improving outcomes for vulnerable children and optimising the use of police resources.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

The issue of missing persons investigations presents a significant challenge for police services, with someone reported missing in the United Kingdom (UK) every 90 seconds, over 170,000 people reported missing every year (Missing People, 2025) and a total of 312,901 persons reported missing to 35 of the 45 UK police services in 2022-23 (National Crime Agency, 2023). These figures suggest that many persons reported missing, have been reported missing multiple times (Sidebottom, et al., 2020).

These investigations are inevitably complex and resource intensive, with estimations for average cost per investigation being between £1325 and £2415 (Greene & Pakes, 2012), this being dependent on time missing and risk level, which impacts the level of police activity involved in the investigation. Using these figures, for the year of 2022-23 the total cost to UK police services could arguably be between £414m and £755m.

At a time where police resources are stretched with cost saving measures being implemented (Mercer, 2025), findings of unmanageable workloads for investigators, lengthier investigations and reducing prosecutions negatively impacting public confidence in police services (HMICFRS, 2025) these costings are substantial and missing persons clearly have a large impact on police services' capacity.

Missing persons investigations can draw substantial public interest, as evidenced by the Nicola Bulley case (College of Policing, 2023), whereby public interest in the case was described as unprecedented and led to involvement of social-media “detectives” attending the scene and impacting the investigation through the sharing of information and personal viewpoints (College of Policing, 2023). They can also lead to serious crime investigations, such as murder investigations (South Wales Police, 2025). These kinds of cases are rare, and the public don't hear about many of the hundreds of thousands of missing person cases investigated yearly (Fyfe, et al., 2014). Arguably, ensuring an appropriate initial response is

crucial to avoid missed opportunities should the enquiry transform into a major crime, and with enhanced public interest the police response is under the spotlight.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.0 Definition of Missing

“What has become of him all this winter was unknown both to his wife and common friends, sometime it was reported that he was drowned at London, sometime that he lived in Cheshire, but lastly, some meeting him at Bristol reported that he was going into Ireland... At home he is not.” (Cecil, 1601).

The issue of missing persons is centuries old, and the definition of a missing person is not as simple as one may think. Whilst rumours of new locations, or death, may be apparent, the key point is that family and friends are unaware of the persons current whereabouts, and there may be concern for their wellbeing. Shalev Greene, et al. (2017) highlight that there is no universally accepted definition of a missing person.

It is argued that being missing is not an objective status, to be named as missing you must be lost to someone and the term missing is most often attributed by those “left behind” (Parr & Fyfe, 2012), and therefore missingness “denotes a pre-existing relationship with a social network” (Wolfe, 2022) but this also means that being missing is as simple as someone not knowing your location, leading to a broad range of circumstances in which someone may end up being reported missing.

Malcolm Payne (1995) defines being missing as:

“A social situation in which a person is absent from their accustomed network of social and personal relationships to the extent that people within that network defined the absence as interfering with the performance by that person of expected social responsibilities” (Payne, 1995, p. 335).

Biehal, et al. (2003) define going missing as an intentional or unintentional “break in contact which either the missing person or someone else defines as going missing”.

There is no clear definition within society, but it appears that key to being missing is a lack of contact within a social network.

Police services utilised The College of Policing (2024) definition of a missing person, which is:

“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed” (College of Policing, 2024).

The College of Policing admit that this is a broad definition but argue broadness is required to ensure that a policing response is considered for any person reported missing to the police.

Whilst persons have always become lost, or gone missing, historically this was not seen as a ‘state’ or government issue and was resolved privately by families, or any ambiguity surrounding their location and wellbeing resolved by simply presuming them to be deceased (Wolfe, 2022). This being until the modernisation of police services, which moved from simply enforcing law to more of a public safety role with the police seen as an authority to foster public safety with greater demands made upon them for non-criminal matters, such as “reuniting lost children with their families” (Monkkonen, 1981, p. 4).

With such a broad definition utilised by the College of Policing, this suggests the question of whether the police are an appropriate agency for all missing persons, and how to appropriately manage the potential demand. Barber (2022), in his Strategic Review of Policing, argues that police should respond to these incidents but suggests that a wider public safety system needs to consider the preventative measures required to minimise this demand. James et al. (2008) explain that whilst it is not a crime in itself to go missing, the missing person may have done so with underpinning criminal motive, or the outcome of the missing person investigation could demonstrate a crime has been committed, or there may be no criminal aspect but could relate to social issues such as mental health issues, substance misuse, isolation or loneliness, unintentionally becoming lost. They argue that

“the list is seemingly endless” (James, et al., 2008). This demonstrates the wide range of circumstances that leads to a person being reported missing, and the plethora of harms they may come to. Risk is the commonly used phrase to quantify and define these possible harms within missing person investigations.

## 2.1 Definition of Risk and Risk Assessment

“Risk is a curious and complex concept. In a sense it is unreal in that it is always concerned with the future, with possibilities, with what has not yet happened.” (Elms, 1992, p. 30)

Risk can be defined as a binary concept combining the possibility of a harmful or adverse event, and the uncertainty regarding the probability or timing of such an event (Covello & Merkhofer, 1993). Risk assessment is said to be the “process of estimating both the probability that an event will occur and the probable magnitude of its adverse effects” (Gerba, 2019).

Hurst (1998) argues that risk is a subjective construct borne from knowledge of hazards, which are “objective and real” and that this means risk assessment has a “strong human dimension” with people having differing views on the magnitude of a hazard, and the likelihood of it occurring.

## 2.2 College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice

The College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) (2024) sets out the model for responding to missing persons cases. The level of police activity assigned to a missing persons case is determined by the assessment of risk (College of Policing, 2024). The APP (2024) dictates that missing persons can be given one of four risk levels, that sit within a continuum of risk, and define the level of police response that should be afforded to each risk level:

*Table 1: The risk assessment table (College of Policing, 2024)*

| <b>Risk Grading</b> | <b>Assessment of Risk</b>                                                           | <b>Actions Required</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Very Low Risk       | There is a very low risk of harm to either the subject or the public                | Actions to locate the subject and/or gather further information should be agreed with the informant and a latest review time set to reassess the risk.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Low Risk            | The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal   | Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Medium Risk         | The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious | An active and measured response by the police and other agencies to trace the missing person and support the person reporting.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| High Risk           | The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely    | Immediate deployment of police resources (aside from cases where specialist searches are required such as searching water or forests in hours of darkness). Senior management must be involved in the examination of initial lines of enquiry and approval of appropriate staffing levels. An investigating officer should be assigned and possible an SIO and a police search advisor (PoISA). Children's services should be notified immediately if the person is under 18. |

Traditionally risk is assessed and graded by considering the likelihood of something happening, and the severity of the consequence if it did happen, this was then combined to give an overall risk grading, where action was targeted towards the high probability and high severity risks, and low probability and low severity risks required less action, or even be accepted (Higbee, 2017).

The risk assessment gradings within the APP (2024) combine the likelihood and severity to give an overall risk grading, low risk being risk is minimal but possible, medium risk being that risk is likely but not serious and high risk being that risk is serious and very likely. The

APP (2024) states that the risk levels sit within a continuum, meaning the risk can change gradually across the different gradings. Although it could be argued that this is simply modelling the impact of harm as per traditional risk assessment matrices. The APP (2024) continuum of risk fails to separate impact and probability within its gradings, meaning that where there is a possibility of a high level of harm but little evidence to support the likelihood or immediacy of the harm being caused, then the risk likely sits between two levels on the continuum, which each have vastly different police responses attached to them.

### 2.3 Risk Assessment Impact on Resource Allocation and Outcome

Empirical data within academia has shown that the risk classification afforded to a missing person enquiry has a direct impact on the number of tasks generated to locate the missing person (Shalev & Collie, 2024). They found that the risk level affected the time taken to resolve the case as well, evidencing a correlation showing that high risk cases were resolved quickest, followed by medium and then low risk cases. However, these results were skewed somewhat by major outliers (such as a missing person case that lasted 752 days) and that high risk cases where there was large search related activity, rather than an enquiry-led investigation also increased the time taken to resolve the case (Shalev & Collie, 2024).

Whilst this study considered the impact on the time a missing person was outstanding for; other studies have considered the effectiveness of the risk assessment in predicting a harmful outcome for missing persons. Phoenix and Francis (2023) found that in 6% of high-risk cases the missing person suffered a harmful outcome, this reducing to 2.6% for medium risk cases and 3.8% for low-risk cases. Doyle and Barnes (2020) found that 10.8% of high-risk missing persons suffered harm and 2.6% of medium and low risk missing persons suffered harm. They surmise that the 90% of high risk missing persons who did not suffer harm resulted in “a very high level of wasted effort” (Doyle & Barnes, 2020) and highlight the 56% false positive rate for persons who had suffered harm but not been classified as high risk, indicating resources should have been better spent focussing on these cases. This is a high-level empirical study but cannot take into account whether the high risk grading has

resulted in faster resolution as per previous studies (and possibly intervention prior to harm being suffered) or the level of harm suffered in those cases where the missing person was deemed to suffer harm other than being found deceased (i.e. was it serious harm as defined within the APP (2024)).

Hurst (1998) argues that the concept of risk assessment as a “pure, objective, scientific activity needs to be abandoned” due to the level of uncertainty in assessing likelihood and probability of harms. Fyfe, et al. (2014) argued that the way in which missing person cases are responded to should be a “mix of police craft, ‘science’ and ‘reputational’ issues” (Fyfe, et al., 2014).

## 2.4 Risk Assessment Distribution

Across the missing person enquiries collated by the National Crime Agency (2023) approximately 5.7% were classified as low risk, 74.4% were classified as medium risk, and 19.8% classified as high risk. Within Dyfed-Powys Police the split was 12.3% classified as low risk, 72.1% classified as medium risk and 15.6% classified as high risk. Dr Shalev-Greene (2020) argues to split the medium risk category, to further classify and enhance understanding of risk within this medium risk category, given that almost three-quarters of missing persons sit within this category and must have differing vulnerabilities and associated risks. Eales (2017) also asks whether “medium-high” and “medium-low” categories would be beneficial to separate the many risks sitting within the medium category, but also considers whether the risk continuum could be simplified by removing the medium risk category and simply having standard or high risk. Within policing, there has been some amendments to risk categories in recent years, with a previous category of “no apparent risk” being replaced with the current “very low risk” (College of Policing, 2023), retaining four separate risk gradings (very low, low, medium, high). However, some police forces in the UK only adopt three risk gradings (low, medium and high) such as West Yorkshire Police (2024) and Nottinghamshire Police (2021).

A two-tier risk category model is operated by police in the Netherlands, however research suggests that in these circumstances Dutch police grade 35% of cases as high risk, despite less than 5% meeting the criteria for high risk based on further review (Schouten & Ven den Eshof, 2006), this being possible evidence of over-evaluating of risk where the number of risk levels are reduced, or an inability to effectively separate risks into a sufficient number of levels impacting the prioritisation of cases.

## 2.5 What is considered High Risk/Serious Harm

Within the APP (2024) serious harm is defined as “an event which is life threatening and/or traumatic and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible” (Home Office, 2023).

This definition serves as a crucial threshold for assigning a high risk grading to a missing person and highlights how psychological harm is equally important, but the trauma and recovery from the event is the key element to determining whether or not the harm is deemed serious (Home Office, 2023).

The simplified APP (2024) definition of high risk is that serious harm is very likely. This combines the severity and likelihood of harm and creates a possible flaw where there is a risk of serious harm, however there is limited information to suggest how likely that harm is based on the current circumstances. It has been found in numerous studies that the risk factor most likely to cause a high risk grading is suicidal intention (Phoenix, 2017) (Phoenix & Francis, 2023). This indicates that immediacy of the harm being caused may influence the decision to assess the risk as high. Shalev and Collie (2024) explained that high risk cases were usually where the missing person was “deemed likely to come to immediate harm”.

Where the criteria for the impact of harm is met, the person may be classified as a lower risk level if the risk is not immediately apparent. The simplified APP (2024) definition of medium risk is that risk is likely but not serious, and this could raise the question as to where those at risk of serious harm, but where it is not very likely, must sit within the continuum.

## 2.6 Risks for Repeat Missing Children

A recent study (Fox, et al., 2024) examined a sample of safeguarding practice reviews for children who had been seriously harmed, intersecting this with missing person cases relating to each child. This method considers harm suffered and the missing incidents holistically and not simply whether the harm was suffered during the missing episode. The study argues that these seriously harmed children had a disproportionately higher rate of being missing than the general population of children, (31% vs 1%) and that the seriously harmed children were “commonly missing repeatedly” (Fox, et al., 2024). The study suggests that risk for missing children is often assessed as a single event for the missing episode, and cumulative risks are not considered. The reason for this, they argue, is that many of these are looked after children and full details of the risks they face are not shared with police, nor do police services proactively request full details. The study also argues there is underestimation of risk when risk assessing based on a single event, and evidences how a repeat missing child at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) was graded as medium risks of multiple occasions. CSE being a harm that is evidently traumatic, with well documented evidence as to the significant trauma, psychological harm and possible recovery is difficult (McElvaney, 2013) (NSPCC, 2024).

Hutchings et al (2018) found, by studying a mixture of repeat missing children cases and single missing children cases, that the repeat missing children were far more likely to be linked to two or more of the following vulnerabilities:

- Being a looked after child (in local authority care)
- History of child abuse or neglect
- History of child sexual exploitation
- History of substance abuse
- Known to youth offending services

(Hutchings, et al., 2018, p. 113)

This is further evidenced by Thomas and Ferguson (2023) whose study following up on missing children reported to the police in 2005 found that in the following 10 years those reported missing on multiple occasions (rather than single occasions) were more likely to suffer mental health related vulnerabilities and have had involvement with the criminal justice system. Thomas and Ferguson (2023) also found that 2.1% of the missing children studied were now deceased. Whilst they do not have the data available in their study to evidence this, they hypothesise that this may be linked to risks in their life that were present prior to, or after, going missing and that the strong association between missing events and mental health concerns may also be a factor.

Conversely, it has been evidenced that the rate for assessing a missing child as high risk is higher for single-event missing children, dropping from 7% to 3% where a child was reported missing multiple times (Lopez, et al., 2023).

Various research highlights the exploitative environments that missing children often enter, whether those be relating to sexual exploitation (Bezeczky & Wilkins, 2022) or criminal exploitation, such as county lines (Sidebottom, et al., 2020). These harms are likely to meet the definition of serious harm as discussed earlier, yet evidence from Lopez, et al. (2023) that repeat missing children are less likely to be placed as high risk. It is also shown that there are occasions where risks, CSE being specifically named, is not considered high risk by police risk assessors (HMICFRS, 2025) and missing children are graded as medium or even low risk despite there being known CSE risks. Reviews showed that cases had been placed as medium risk on the basis that the child had been missing previously and had returned with no obvious harm suffered (HMIC, 2016).

## 2.7 Police Attitudes to Repeat Missing Children

Tansill (2021) argues that frequently missing children can be interpreted as lower risk, due to the fact that these children frequently return unharmed and a false notion that due to being missing often they are “streetwise” and can therefore look after themselves. A study involving interviews with police and partner agencies in the UK found that police perceive the

responsibility for missing children to be heavily on their shoulders, impacting their capacity to address other critical issues (Waring, et al., 2023).

In a review of the Metropolitan Police service's handling of exploited children (HMICFRS, 2025), victim-blaming language was found, indicating perceptions that going missing was a behavioural issue rather than a vulnerability. Missing person incident logs were endorsed with the term "regular missing person", and it was felt the risk was then downplayed as it was seen as normal behaviour. One example is highlighted where a 14-year-old boy was reported missing from care, he was known to be a victim of criminal exploitation and had recently been the victim of a stabbing but the officer assessing the risk highlighted that as he had been missing before the behaviour was not out of character and therefore stated there were no enhanced concerns and graded him as medium risk (HMICFRS, 2025).

Hayden and Goodship (2015) argue that the sheer volume of missing persons reported to the police makes it difficult to respond and risk assess every missing person case appropriately, especially out of office hours when other agencies are not readily available to assist (such as social services for children in care). They also highlight frustration from police officers who displayed an attitude that missing children were sometimes just "pushing the boundaries" and then received a response akin to a criminal by having police searching for them. This viewpoint is shared by some children who have been missing previously, where they feel that the response was overbearing (Beckett, et al., 2015). Qualitative evidence shows that some children were made to feel like a criminal due to the police response, however the report highlights how this interaction style by police officers then results in a lack of understanding of their circumstances whilst missing and the root-cause of them being reported missing.

Furthermore, Harris (2019) highlights officers expressing how repeated calls for the same children going missing led to diminished emotional, and likely operational, investment in the investigation. In addition, Eales (2017) highlights how operational capacity may influence risk assessment, stating that lower risk gradings may then be given to conserve resources for

other matters. Conversely, Heaton (2011) believes that a lack of resources may actually stem from risk aversion and disproportionate responses to lower risk cases being implemented due to previous public criticisms of the police and a fear of public outcry in rare cases where significant harm is suffered.

Smith and Shalev-Greene (2015) surveyed police supervisors and found the majority had not read national or force guidance regarding missing persons investigations. They argue that perceptions and attitudes therefore heavily influence risk assessments. Doyle and Barnes (2020), in calling for an evidence-based approach to risk assessing, highlight that if time and money spent on missing person incidents could be diverted to prevention of serious crime (with no impact on the risk of harm to missing persons) this would better serve public interest. They go on to highlight that the flaw in subjective risk assessments, is that police officers are not appropriately trained.

## 2.8 Training Considerations

It is often highlighted that there is a perceived lack of training for police officers in the overall response to missing persons (Smith & Shalev-Greene, 2015) (Waring, et al., 2023). Smith and Shalev-Greene (2015) found that police officers and staff were concerned about their lack of training in this area, with 21% not having received any training regarding missing persons and 50% had not had training within the last two years. Only 23% of the respondents stated they had received specific training regarding missing persons. They go on to recommend that forces provide a specific training package, that firstly focuses on the proper assessment of risk and then how to respond in line with the APP (2024) (Smith & Shalev-Greene, 2015).

Hedges (2017) suggested that whilst risk factors have been identified to be used as indicators of risk (as they have within the APP), police officers charged with conducting risk assessments have received little or no training in order to interpret these risk factors and make an informed decision on risk. Smith and Shalev-Greene (2015) found that almost half of respondents in their survey disagreed that their training enabled them to make informed

risk assessments, and that risk assessments are often subjective and inconsistent. A HMIC report (2016) found that knowledge and training was varied across forces, with some forces demonstrating a poor understanding of risks such as CSE. The report states that “incorrect risk assessments for some children are leaving them at risk of harm” (HMIC, 2016, p. 8).

Some Police Officers hold different viewpoints though, with one study showing that some officers believed that policy and guidance only served to guide and experience was what really mattered when making decisions in missing person cases (Fyfe, et al., 2014).

## 2.9 Changing the Model

APP (2024) explains that risk assessment for missing persons “will always be subjective and is informed by professional judgement” (College of Policing, 2024). Some studies question whether the current risk assessment model, and subjectivity, could be amended to provide a more effective and evidence-based response. One study showed that risk factors which most frequently appeared for missing persons who were later found deceased by suicide, when grouped together, would often be classified as low or medium risk in the absence of a clear suicidal intention (Yong & Tzani-Pepelasis, 2020). The study suggests a script or question set style risk assessment, whereby totals indicate a likely level of risk, this only complementing the professional judgement of the risk assessor.

Doyle and Barnes (2020) also call for a change to the current risk assessment process. They found that across a broad spectrum of missing persons, females aged 18-64 and males aged 65+ were at the highest risk of harm during missing episodes and found that males and females under the age of 18 were at the lowest risk during missing episodes. Across all cases suicidal ideation was the most significant predictor of harm, whereas being in care and being a repeat missing person decreased the likelihood of suffering harm in a missing episode compared to the average. However, when applied specifically to young persons under the age of 18, being in care and being a repeat missing person increased their risk of harm. Given their evidence that variables (such as age or gender) can alter the impact a certain risk factor has on the likelihood of harm being suffered, they call for the one-size-fits-

all model currently employed by police services to be replaced by an evidence-based process for predicting risk using predictive modelling.

Sidebottom and Davies (2025) also found that age and gender caused variability in the influence some risk factors have on harm being suffered and believe a more nuanced risk assessment question set should be developed for specific age and gender categories. They developed a statistical model for predicting harm in missing episodes and found that there were ten factors that were significant in predicting harm, however they found that for some cases where harm was suffered in a missing episode the statistical model did not flag them as high risk, however the police risk assessment (using the current, subjective model) had assessed the case as high risk. However, it also found some cases where police had assessed a case as medium or low risk and harm was suffered had been flagged as high risk by their statistical model. This suggests that a hybrid approach, utilising professional judgement alongside predictive modelling may yield more accurate results. Importantly, the study also found that one of the questions most completed for high-risk cases was about any other factors not mentioned which the risk assessor feels to be relevant. They highlight that further research should be undertaken to establish if there are common themes here for inclusion in the risk assessment question set.

Within Spain, a risk-assessment algorithm is utilised to assess the risk for domestic violence cases, however concerns have been raised about this approach in a case where a woman was assessed as being at “medium-risk” of further violence following threats and previous violent episodes. While questions were raised regarding the accuracy of the model for assessing risk, a Spanish Police Chief Inspector did not believe the algorithm had failed but observed that “total security does not exist”, whilst one of Malaga’s gender violence judges expressed a need to broaden how risk is assessed stating that this algorithm was one of a number of methods she combines to assess the risk of violence in cases (Pressly & Escribano, 2025). It raises the question of whether algorithmic, or data-driven risk assessment methods should be considered, or whether they pose a risk.

Newiss (2006) believes that a mixture of subjective professional judgment and objective data is needed to best inform risk assessments for missing persons, however goes on to say risk assessments should not be based solely on age or gender, explaining that these alone are not reliable in predicting risk of harm. However, his research was predominantly focussed on death as a harmful outcome, and this research doesn't consider the more hidden harms young persons may be exposed to when missing.

Doyle and Barnes (2020) believe that the current three risk gradings (low, medium and high) should be expanded to allow enhanced classification and understanding of risks for missing persons. Within Australia several different risk grading models are utilised including matrices with further risk categories. In New South Wales a risk matrix is utilised to consider the likelihood of harm alongside the impact of the harm, to give a risk grading on a five-point ranging from low risk up to extreme risk. Victoria Police uses a weighted system of indicators to suggest whether a case is medium or high risk, dependent on the number of risk indicators present. Queensland police designate a missing person as high risk if any of 18 risk indicators are present (Bricknell, 2017). It is accepted however, that these differing models have received little evaluation, and it has been suggested that they should be evaluated to suggest one method for conformity across Australian police services. Whilst multiple categories may offer more specific detailing and understanding of apparent risk, the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland states that the three-tiered low, medium and high system should be implemented across Scotland. This being to ensure consistency across different agencies, and a consistent, easily understandable definition of risk. They do highlight however, that the purpose of this is for other agencies to be involved in and contribute to risk assessment for missing person cases where required.

## 2.10 Children in Care and Partnership Working

The importance of working with other agencies is brought into context when considering the volume of children who go missing from care settings. Children in care are twenty times more likely to missing than those not in care (Tansill, 2021). Boulton et al. (2023) found that

within their sample of missing children 43% were missing from care settings, which they highlight is exceptionally high given the population of children living in care is less than 1%. They also found that across all child missing persons (missing from care or from family homes) 73% of the sample were already known to children's services and 54% had an allocated key worker. Interestingly, despite the inherent vulnerability of a child in care, one study found that a child missing from home was twice as likely to be graded as high risk than a child missing from a care setting (Hayden & Goodship, 2015), however state that this may be due to the lower ages of those missing from home compared to those missing from care. Furthering this, Hayden and Shalev-Greene (2016) found that children in residential care settings made up the vast majority of repeat missing persons (missing 3 times or more in a year).

Hutchings et al. (2018) found that repeat missing children (those missing more than once) were 4.9 times more likely to be a looked after child, 2.6 times more likely to have misused alcohol or drugs, 2.2 times more likely to have suffered abuse or neglect and 1.8 times more likely to be deemed at risk of CSE.

It could be inferred from the research conducted by Hayden and Shalev-Greene (2016) Tansil (2021), and Boulton, et al. (2023), that children in care settings are more likely to become a missing person, more likely to be missing multiple times and more likely to be exposed to greater risk. It has however been shown that those missing from care and missing repeatedly are less likely to be graded as high risk (Lopez, et al., 2023).

Hayden and Goodship (2015) found evidence that risk-pertinent information was not readily shared between social services and police forces, and that differing views and understandings of risk between partner agencies raised concerns regarding the risk assessment of children missing from care settings. Fox et al (2024) contend that to improve risk assessment police services should assume there is information which hasn't been shared and be more proactive in requesting information from partner agencies. They advocate specific prompts being included in local policies and guidance documents to direct

police risk assessors to appropriate resources and agencies for such information. However, another qualitative study indicates that often the information provided by other agencies are “meaningless” risk labels (The Children's Society, 2019). Police officers felt that being told a child was at high risk of CSE was meaningless without further context, or a trigger plan attached to the label.

Within Wales a Child Information Form is utilised to ensure appropriate information is shared in a timely manner. The Child Information Form documents full details and risks about a child in care, and is handed to foster carers by social services, for use and sharing with the police should the child be reported missing. (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2021).

Greenalgh and Shalev-Greene (2021) propose specialist teams utilise prevention methods in partnership with other agencies to tackle the root cause of repeat missing children. These findings are borne out of concerns about the risk assessment of, and response to, vulnerable missing persons, highlighting that response officers tended not to use the APP (2024) for missing persons, whereas specialist missing person teams were more likely to use APP (2024) to guide their decision making. They highlight this is likely due to a lack of training for response officers, as well as the high workloads they carry, and heavy requirements placed upon them. A further benefit, they suggest, is relieving some demand from the workload of response teams.

### 2.11 Missing Person Investigation Teams

Specialist missing person investigation teams have been introduced in some police forces across the UK. HMICFRS (2025) were complimentary of the use of such a team within the Metropolitan Police, who take ownership of the investigation of medium and high-risk missing children, where there is a risk of exploitation. They also utilise a central vulnerability hub to conduct the ongoing risk assessments for missing children in this category, enabling a link between the police and partner agencies.

A study examining the impact of missing person teams across UK police forces conducted by Waring et al. (2023) highlighted that the use of dedicated teams was imposed for a number of reasons: to ensure child-centred approaches to risk assessment and investigation of missing episodes, to ensure meaningful engagement with other agencies, to minimise unnecessary interaction between police and children, and to reduce demand on frontline resources.

The study found that overall risk gradings reduced, with less children being regarded as medium risk and more being classified as low risk or even 'no apparent risk' in which case the missing person team liaised with care homes and guided them through their responsibilities to locate and return children missing from their guardianship. The risk gradings lessened over time, with a higher proportion of cases graded low risk as the new members of the missing person team settled into their roles. Quantitative evidence shows that there was a 50% reduction in missing person reports made to the police service following the implementation of the missing person team, and low and no apparent risk gradings were increased. The perception of officers in the missing person teams was that this reduction was due to a better understanding of responsibilities from the staff working in care homes. However, it's difficult to know if this reduction in reporting is a true indication of minimised demand, or whether it demonstrates a lack of confidence in the police, as one officer within the missing person team stated "It's not just about pushing back when the call comes in, now the call doesn't even come to us." [DC5]" (Waring, et al., 2023).

The study went on to consider the impact of the missing person team on repeat missing persons and average time missing. It found that repeat missing persons increased, albeit explains that the function of the missing person team is not problem-solving for the root cause of the missing episode, and found that the average time a child was missing for increased following the implementation of the missing person team. In this context it suggests that a reduction in response officers conducting active searches for the missing person, along with the average reduction in risk gradings, resulted in elongated missing

episodes. The association between higher risk gradings and quicker resolution times has been evidenced by Phoenix (2017) and Shalev and Collie (2024) and it has been evidenced that increased time missing is conducive to increased risk, including offending behaviour and exploitation (Hutchings, et al., 2018).

## 2.12 Literature Review Conclusion

Within this literature review section, several key themes have become apparent.

Firstly, the scale of missing persons in the UK, the cost to policing and the impact it has upon policing is evident. At a time where police services need to operate as efficiently as possible there is a requirement for police forces to consider their working practises and consider how efficiencies can be made. Whilst policing should still respond to missing persons, there is a clear need for a partnership approach to prevention of missing persons.

Whilst the definition of a missing person may not be agreed universally, the police services of England and Wales operate using one single definition and agreed risk assessment levels. However, these risk assessment levels do not allow separation of likelihood and severity of harm meaning there may be gaps or inconsistencies in the subjective application of risk levels.

There are disagreements amongst academics as to whether risk assessments should be objective or subjective. Whilst neither appear to be suitable on their own, a blend of objective and evidence-based risk assessment along with subjective ratification may be the most appropriate method. There are concerns about the training provided to police officers charged with conducting risk assessments and managing missing person investigations.

Repeat missing children are more likely to be at risk of serious harm (such as exploitation) but are less likely to receive a high-risk grading than single episode missing children. In some cases, risk is downplayed for repeat missing children. Children in care are also more likely to be repeat missing persons and more likely to be at risk of serious harm, yet

information sharing between social services, carers and police does not appear to be effective.

Specialist missing person investigation teams appear to have good connections with social services and care homes. With these specialist teams in charge of risk assessing and managing missing person investigations risk assessments tend to be lower and there was a reduction in missing person reports from care homes. However, there was also increased time to resolution (finding the missing person) which may result in increased risk of harm. Further research is needed to understand if this is hiding risk, or dealing with missing person reports in a more proportionate manner.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

### 3.0 Introduction

The overall aim of the research is to consider the effectiveness of the current risk assessment process for missing persons, specifically for repeat missing children within the Dyfed-Powys Police area and consider areas for improvement.

This chapter outlines the chosen methodology for this research study and explains the paradigm chosen to effectively meet the research objectives.

Objectives:

1. Outline the current risk assessment process used within Dyfed-Powys Police and compare with selected other police forces for missing person investigations.
2. Explore academic literature regarding risk assessment and associated risks with children who are reported missing repeatedly.
3. Critically analyse the current risk assessment process within Dyfed-Powys Police and evaluate its effectiveness in identifying risks for repeat missing children.
4. Recommend a risk assessment process and supporting guidance to enhance Dyfed-Powys Police's risk assessment and response to reports of repeat missing children.

### 3.1 Definition of Research

Research is defined within the Cambridge English Dictionary (2024) as:

“a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover new information or reach a new understanding.”

Whilst new knowledge is one desired outcome of research, another is the validation and refining of existing knowledge through “diligent systematic enquiry” (Naidoo, 2011).

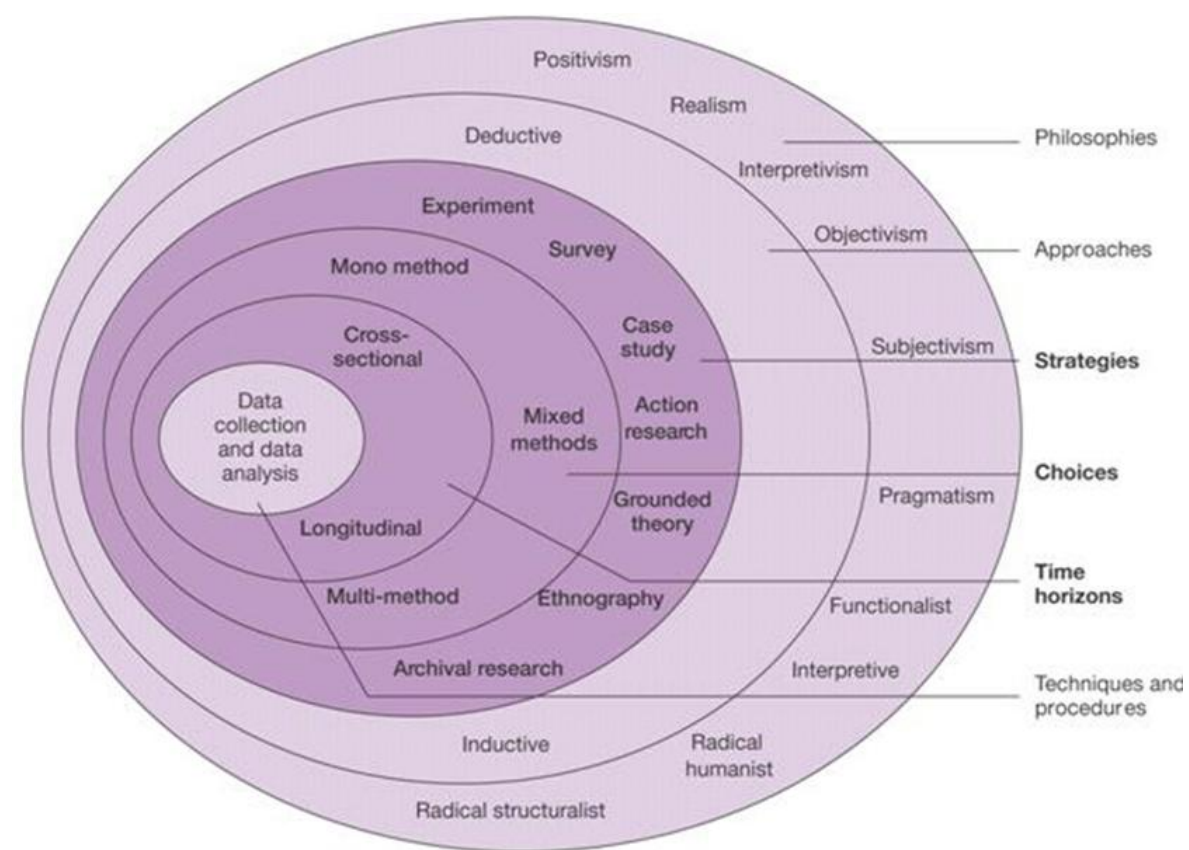
Saunders et al. (2016) provide a definition that encompasses both the above, and state that research is “the systematic collection and interpretation of information with a clear purpose, to find things out” (Saunders, et al., 2016).

The research topic was chosen due to the researcher's professional curiosity on the subject, an important aspect of social science research according to Bhattacharyya (2006) who argues that research should be undertaken as a passion, with organic interest in the subject preventing a mechanical approach that narrows the researcher's field of vision.

### 3.2 Research Design

The Research Onion model developed by Saunders et al (2016) serves as a guiding structure for research methodology. Each layer of the onion reflects a key decision area that shapes the research design. This model has been used to design this research study, and the following chapter now discusses each layer in relation to the current study.

*Figure 1: The Research Onion (Saunders, et al., 2016)*



### 3.2.1 Philosophy

The research onion has six layers. Beginning with the research philosophy and approach.

The philosophy is the foundation of a research study and demonstrates the belief about the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) that the research is built upon.

This study sits within the pragmatism philosophy.

Pragmatism aims to approach research from a practical point of view and in this paradigm research is value driven and often initiated by the researcher's doubts and beliefs (Saunders, et al., 2016). Pragmatism places an emphasis on practical solutions and outcomes, and in this study the researcher will draw conclusions based on participants' responses to consider practical changes and solutions to improve current process.

Pragmatic philosophy reflects a belief that knowledge is socially situated, problem-centred, and best generated through practical inquiry (Morgan, 2007). This makes pragmatism particularly suitable for social sciences where assumptions and objective conceptions of truth might be challenged through practical applications (Biesta, 2010).

Pragmatism allows for the integration of both positivist and interpretivist approaches, supporting the use of mixed methods and recognising that different types of questions require different types of evidence (Biesta, 2010). This philosophical stance aligns with the real-world, applied nature of this research study, which is concerned with Dyfed-Powys Police's operational risk assessment for missing persons. Pragmatism is especially appropriate in a policing context, where these risk assessment decisions are often inclusive of subjective insights such as professional experience and judgement, as detailed within the APP (2024). Pragmatism is further considered a useful paradigm for mixed-methods study (Biesta, 2010) (Morgan, 2007).

Pragmatism has however been criticised, with Hampson & McKinley (2023) arguing that pragmatism is often adopted as a justification for the use of mixed-methods study rather than its philosophical qualities and the researcher's belief in the paradigm. However, Ghiara

(2019) contends that philosophical paradigms should not constrain methodological options and suggests researchers should consider the methodology that best fits the research objectives and then consider the underlying paradigm that shapes the research. Likewise, Morgan (2007) considers that method choice should be driven by the research objective rather than allegiance to a specific paradigm.

### 3.2.2 Approach

Saunders et al. (2016) explain that a deductive approach involves the development of theoretical hypotheses which are then tested through empirical evidence. It may be that a theory is posited and then data collected to test the researcher's theory. Whereas an inductive approach requires the collection of data or empirical evidence to explore a phenomenon which is then utilised to develop a theory or conclusion.

The approach used in this study is inductive in the main, seeking to build insight using data that the researcher will gather (primarily from operational participants and secondarily from readily available data), and through investigating existing policy and guidance documents. The data obtained will be used to understand how risk assessments are conducted in practice and how they align with, or diverge from, policy and guidance. However, there are deductive elements within the survey where some questioning seeks to measure whether being a repeat missing child desensitises risk assessors to the risks apparent and therefore cause a reduction in risk. This is based on a hypothesis formed following the critical literature review section of this research whereby it was found that some academics considered being a repeat missing person causes desensitisation to risk (Harris, 2019) (Tansill, 2021).

### 3.2.3 Strategy

The research integrates two strategies, firstly archival research through an analysis of missing person policy and guidance documents across the four Welsh police forces (Dyfed-Powys Police, South Wales Police, Gwent Police, and North Wales Police). Secondly, a survey of selected police officers and staff within Dyfed-Powys Police. This survey will be conducted in two parts, the first element being a questionnaire of operational staff involved in

risk assessment of missing persons (comprising of Response Sergeants, Response Inspectors, Force Incident Managers (FIMs), and Chief Inspectors). The second element being a survey through semi-structured interviews with FIMs designed to add further context to the initial questionnaire results. These components have been chosen to provide an understanding of both the strategic frameworks that shape risk assessment for missing persons and the experiential and operational insights of those conducting these risk assessments operationally.

A questionnaire survey was chosen as the primary strategy to gather the quantitative and qualitative data required. Questionnaires are being increasingly used within social sciences and are considered a low cost and efficient method of gathering required data (Marshall, 2005) from large numbers of participants.

Some drawbacks to questionnaires are that they can be unsuitable for some participants (such as those with visual impairment or poor literacy) and if certain questions are misunderstood, they cannot be clarified by the researcher. These limitations have been accepted by the researcher in this study.

There is also “little flexibility for respondents to present their own perspective on issues” (Marshall, 2005). To mitigate against this issue qualitative questions have been included, including optional questions where participants are asked if they would like to expand upon their responses to closed questions to provide further context and viewpoints to support their answer. Furthermore, the interview surveys being conducted will afford further opportunity to contextualise data with viewpoints of operational risk assessors.

### 3.2.4 Method Choices

Saunders et al (2016) explain that mono-method is the use of a single data collection technique, multi-method is the use of more than one data collection technique but within the same methodological tradition (i.e. two qualitative methods such as interviews and focus

groups), and mixed methods is the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis.

This research adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design whereby qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed concurrently but separately, with results integrated during interpretation in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the issue (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Quantitative data will be drawn from the questionnaire to understand what tools and information is most used to conduct risk assessments and the levels of training staff have received. Qualitative data will be obtained through the surveys by seeking to understand practitioner viewpoints on policy and guidance, behaviours that indicate risk, and by using scenario-based questions to determine whether repeat missing episodes influence the risk assessment in any way.

It is intended using mixed methodology to understand the policy and guidance for risk assessment of missing children within Dyfed-Powys Police, how accurately that policy and guidance is followed, whether the policy or guidance have flaws which may result in inaccurate risk assessments, and practitioner views on risk. The intention is to triangulate the results to evaluate the current risk assessment process and policy and consider how the risk assessment process or policy may be improved.

Whilst some argue that qualitative and quantitative methods are divergent paradigms that are incompatible with one another (Greene, 2006), others argue that by using mixed methodology and triangulating results to combine them for analysis there is an increased chance of maximising the benefits and minimising the flaws in individual research methods (Hussein, 2009). Morse and Niehaus (2009, p. 14) explain that by supplementing the quantitative findings with qualitative findings, you enhance understanding of the results from another perspective.

Combining quantitative and qualitative methods can offer insights into organisational culture and personal perspectives (Engelmann, 2023), and the triangulation of such can then offer greater understanding of measurable patterns and the contextual reasoning behind these patterns (Mangels, et al., 2020) especially in this context where the risk assessment is heuristic.

### 3.2.5 Time Horizon

The study is cross sectional in that it will not focus on how policy or risk assessment has evolved over time, but rather focus on the effectiveness of the current policy and guidance, and operational risk assessment of missing persons at the current point in time (Saunders, et al., 2016).

There is potential for longitudinal study following from this research, if any policy or guidance changes are made following the research then there is potential to develop the research to track how effective any changes have been, and whether there have been practical implications over time from any policy and guidance changes.

## 3.3 Data Collection

### 3.3.1 Policy Outline and Comparison

A document review will be conducted on missing persons policies or practice guides from the four Home Office police forces in Wales: South Wales Police, North Wales Police, Dyfed-Powys Police, and Gwent Police. Thematic analysis of these documents will be conducted to compare certain aspects of the documents where policy or guidance may differ and impact the risk assessment of missing persons. Areas for thematic analysis will be the use of APP (2024) and adoption of the risk levels within this, any specific policy or guidance for risk gradings afforded to children (under 18 years old), who is designated as the initial and subsequent risk assessor for missing persons, any discrepancy or other notable differences within the policies that relate to the risk assessment, or risks associated with, missing children or repeat missing children.

### 3.3.2 Questionnaire Survey of Operational Staff

Questionnaire surveys are a frequently used method for data collection (Saunders, et al., 2016). They highlight how each person answering the same questions enables efficient gathering of data for quantitative analysis. Ponto (2015) argues that questionnaire surveys can have limitations, such as lack of response from individuals requested to complete the survey which may limit the validity of the survey, or measurement error where questions aren't understood or answered truthfully. Saunders, et al. (2016) state that questionnaires should be chosen after considering other options for research methods and highlight the benefit of questionnaires for identifying variability in attitude, opinion and organisational practices. It was felt that questionnaires would be a useful research tool within this study.

A questionnaire survey will be sent to officers involved in operational risk assessments for missing persons, including:

- Response Sergeants
- Response Inspectors
- Force Incident Managers (FIMs)
- Chief Inspectors

The questionnaire will be designed to gather the following information:

- Rank, role and length of time involved in this business area
- Information about training received
- Knowledge and understanding of policy and guidance
- Tools and information used to inform risk assessments
- Perceptions about repeat missing persons and subsequent impact on risk
- Organisational culture influences

The survey combines closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to gather the above information.

The final section of the questionnaire is a scenario-based set of questions, whereby practitioners are asked to assess risk for 5 different missing children. Two question sets were created (Set A and Set B). Both sets contained the same information about the child and their risks, however in each set questions differed as to whether the child had been missing previously or not. This is designed to understand if knowledge that a child has been missing previously, whether they have come to harm in previous missing episodes or not, influences the risk assessment for that child.

The questionnaire will be created via Microsoft Forms and participants will be asked to complete the questionnaire online which will maximise accessibility (Kumar, et al., 2021) given the wide geographical spread of participants across Dyfed-Powys Police and afford instant anonymity to any participant.

### 3.3.3 Interviews with FIMs

Interviews with Force Incident Managers (FIMs) will then offer further contextual insight using their viewpoints and first-hand experience as the initial risk assessors for missing persons within Dyfed-Powys Police.

Interviews follow a semi-structured format, allowing depth while ensuring coverage of:

- Risk threshold interpretation.
- Availability, and use of, sufficient information to form an initial risk assessment.
- Their views on the subsequent risk assessment process.
- Influence of experience versus training, APP or policy.
- Views on current policy and guidance within Dyfed-Powys Police.

The results of the interviews will be triangulated with the questionnaire results to provide context and deeper understanding of any issues or discrepancies found within the questionnaire data.

### 3.4 Analysis Approach

The data obtained from the questionnaire surveys will be analysed using exploratory data analysis, which emphasises the use of graphs and tables to visualise the quantitative data obtained (Saunders, et al., 2016). Saunders, et al. (2016) explain that one benefit of this method is that it enables the researcher to test relationships within the data that may not have previously been anticipated.

A thematic analysis will be undertaken for the qualitative data obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews with the FIMs. The qualitative data is being obtained to provide context for the quantitative data. Thematic analysis is said to be “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is valued for its capacity to provide contextualised insights, summarise key features from data sets and generate unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This makes it a useful analysis method for a mixed-methods research project whereby the researcher will be seeking to triangulate the qualitative data to contextualise the quantitative findings (Draucker, et al., 2020).

### 3.5 Limitations, Reliability and Validity

There are limitations and considerations regarding the reliability and validity of any research.

One of the key considerations for this research is self-selection bias. The questionnaire survey is being shared with operational staff involved in risk assessment of missing persons with the option to complete it if they wish. This creates the risk of self-selection bias, whereby the participants that opt to participate already have an interest in the topic (Saunders, et al., 2016). In this case it may either be through certain opinions on current policy, or a personal interest in this area of policing. It is anticipated, given the balance of possible opinions that the results will be a reliable representation of the workforce involved.

Participant bias is another consideration, especially for the scenario-based questions.

Participant bias is where responses may be altered due to the participant considering what

the researcher may want to hear (Saunders, et al., 2016). There is a risk that if participants know this area of the research is being conducted to understand if being a repeat missing person alters the risk grading, then it may trigger participants to heighten risk gradings. To mitigate this the question sets will be offered prior to an explanation of the exercise being provided, and the questionnaire will not explain that these questions are seeking to understand discrepancies between first-time and repeat missing person risk assessments. Another area with potential for participant bias, is that participants may provide answers in line with force policy and guidance rather than their actual experience or opinion. To mitigate this anonymity is provided to all participants in the questionnaire from the outset so there is no risk of identification, providing participants security to answer truthfully.

Observer bias is where the researcher allows their own expectations or views to cloud their interpretation of the data (Saunders, et al., 2016). This will be mitigated through specificity in the questions that mitigate misinterpretation. Observer error can occur where data is simply misinterpreted or recorded incorrectly (Saunders, et al., 2016). The mitigation for this is that the questionnaire is conducted on Microsoft Forms, where the data is collected and stored before being analysed by the researcher.

A limitation of this research is that the research is being conducted within one police service, Dyfed-Powys Police, and therefore the results may not be scalable or relevant to other forces, or nationally.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval has been obtained from the University of South Wales Trinity St David.

Approval for the research has also been obtained from Dyfed-Powys Police.

The following ethical safeguards in being for this research. All participants will provide voluntary and informed consent to take part. All participants have the right to withdraw at any time and will be advised how to do so if they wish. All data collected will be anonymised and

presented as such, protecting the confidentiality of participants and their views. No sensitive information will be gathered through this study.

## Chapter 4 – Analysis

### 4.1 Policy and Guidance Review

All four Welsh police services (Dyfed-Powys Police (2024), South Wales Police (2025), Gwent Police (2022) and North Wales Police (2020)) have adopted the APP as their policy for missing persons investigations, with additional guidance or policy documents created to detail slight variations within each force. All four forces adopt the missing person definition detailed within the APP (2024). Within the policies reference is made to a 'no apparent risk' category. This is no longer within the APP (2024) and was amended to 'very low risk' (College of Policing, 2023) but has not been updated within the force policies as yet.

Dyfed-Powys Police (2024), South Wales Police (2025) and Gwent Police (2022) all utilise three risk gradings (low, medium and high) and specifically state that they do not adopt the 'no apparent risk' category. Gwent Police (2022) have documented the 'no apparent risk' category within their policy but state that this is not for police use, they detail that in circumstances where this risk category is appropriate the responsibility is placed back on parents or carers to conduct enquiries. If, following these enquiries, the person has not been located, or other concerns are raised then the person should be recorded as missing and classified as low, medium or high risk.

Each of the four forces have differing internal policies when it comes to the risk assessment of missing children.

Dyfed-Powys Police (2024) state that any child (person under the age of 18) must be placed as medium or high risk.

Gwent Police (2022) state similar, in that any person under 18 must be medium or high risk, however it goes on to specify that any report involving a child under 13 must be classed as at least medium risk. This appears to refer to the use of 'no apparent risk', stating that any child under 13 cannot be placed in this category, whereas a child between 13 and 18 may be

placed as 'no apparent risk' and then later, if considered as a missing person for police to investigate be moved to at least medium risk.

North Wales Police (2020) do not give any direction for specific age groups within their practice guide, and it appears that the categories of low, medium and high are open to be used for any missing person.

South Wales Police (2025) state that any child aged 11 years or under must be placed as high risk. Any child who is aged between 12 and 14 years old must be medium or high risk, and any child who is aged 14 to 17 years may be classified as low, medium or high risk. However, South Wales Police utilise a centrally based missing person investigation team (MPIT) within a strategic safeguarding unit. If a child is initially classified as medium or low risk then the MPIT will review and ratify the risk grading, utilising their connections with other agencies to consider other information available to them. If the risk is ratified as being low risk, then the MPIT will hold the investigation for up to 6 hours (if the child has not returned, been located or there is other information to necessitate a rise in risk level) before re-grading the risk to medium and allocating to a response Inspector for ownership. Interestingly the South Wales Police (2025) instructs that if a missing child is initially graded as medium risk, then the risk cannot be downgraded to low in any circumstances.

Within each force it is the responsibility of the contact centre or control room to conduct an initial risk assessment based on the information reported. Dyfed-Powys Police (2024) are outliers in that they utilise the Force Incident Manager (FIM) to risk assess every missing person report. Across the other forces, they utilise control room supervisors (Gwent Police, 2022) (North Wales Police, 2020), or the MPIT in the case of South Wales (2025), to ratify an initial risk assessment conducted by the contact handler. Within Dyfed-Powys Police (2024) the policy states that following the initial risk assessment by the FIM, where the risk is low or medium the risk should be re-assessed by a first line supervisor, in most cases this will be a response sergeant.

Some of the force policies contained notable differences. South Wales Police (2025) specifically detail truancy. Within the APP (2024) reference is made to truancy, i.e. unauthorised absence from compulsory schooling, stating that it is “not normally something that should be dealt with as a missing person investigation” (College of Policing, 2024) and says that these cases would place an “impossible burden” on the police service. However, it goes on to explain that individual cases reported to the police should be assessed, in case an investigation is warranted and highlights that these unauthorised absences may be indicators of risk, including exploitation. South Wales Police (2025) utilise their MPIT to manage these cases, enabling multi-agency collaboration to assess risks. They reiterate that if the child is aged 11 or under, then they cannot be classified as a truant and must be recorded as a high-risk missing person.

Both South Wales (2025) and Gwent Police (2022) make specific reference to victim-blaming language, and detail phrases that should be avoided when talking about or referencing missing children. Likewise, both policies specifically detail how vulnerable missing children can be and specify the exploitation risks for missing children.

There are clearly differing views across Welsh police services as to how to categorise the risk for missing children, and how to manage the ongoing investigations and subsequent risks. This appears to be replicated as discussed within the literature review section, where West Yorkshire Police (2024) and Nottinghamshire Police (2021) both had policies regarding risk grading levels which differed from each other, and from APP (2024).

## 4.2 Questionnaire Responses

The survey was opened to response/uniform Sergeants and BCU Inspectors (who have direct involvement in, and supervision of, risk assessments for missing persons), Force Incident Managers (who are the initial risk assessors within Dyfed-Powys Police, and Chief Inspectors (undertaking ‘Silver’ command duties). A total of 26 officers responded to the survey. The number of persons it was sent to was higher than this, and the sample size may affect the findings. Bartlett, et al. (2001) advocate much larger sample sizes, stating that less

than around 380 yields lower validity. Whereas Flyvbjerg (2006) contends that a small sample size can yield powerful and generalisable insights through in-depth survey. Within the response/uniform Sergeant group there are two Neighbourhood Sergeants included who completed the survey. Rather than create an additional group, it was felt that neighbourhood and response Sergeants could be amalgamated into one group as they perform the same function for missing persons within DPP.

*Table 2: Survey Respondents*

| Rank / Role            | Number of Respondents |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Sergeant</b>        | 13                    |
| <b>BCU Inspector</b>   | 8                     |
| <b>FIM</b>             | 4                     |
| <b>Chief Inspector</b> | 1                     |

#### 4.2.1 Experience

Participants were asked to indicate the length of time they had been involved in risk assessment of missing persons.

12% (n=3) indicated they had been doing so for between 1 and 5 years, 31% (n=8) for between 5 and 10 years and 58% (n=15) for more than 10 years. This indicating that the participants of the survey were highly experienced in this setting.

#### 4.2.2 Training Provision and Familiarity with DPP Guidance & CoP APP

*Table 3: Training Provision*

| Rank / Role            | No Formal Training | General Training for Missing Person Risk Assessment | Specific Training for Risk Assessment of Missing Children |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Sergeant</b>        | <b>46%</b>         | <b>54%</b>                                          | <b>0%</b>                                                 |
| <b>BCU Inspector</b>   | <b>88%</b>         | <b>12%</b>                                          | <b>0%</b>                                                 |
| <b>FIM</b>             | <b>25%</b>         | <b>75%</b>                                          | <b>0%</b>                                                 |
| <b>Chief Inspector</b> | <b>100%</b>        | <b>0%</b>                                           | <b>0%</b>                                                 |

Whilst general training for missing person risk assessment appears to have been implemented for 42% of the total participant group, it's evident that that training across the Inspecting ranks (aside from the Force Incident Managers) is particularly low. This trend

within DPP follows other studies, such as Fyfe, et al. (2014) finding that 61% of their surveyed Sergeants and Inspectors had received “little or no formal CPD on missing-person investigation” (Fyfe, et al., 2014) and HMIC (2016) reporting that many officers, lacking formal training, learn ad-hoc by “picking up tips from colleagues” (HMIC, 2016).

However, learning in this fashion through osmosis of behaviours and experience doesn’t appear to ensure appropriate knowledge of policy and guidance. Out of the 11 officers indicating they have received training, 9 (82%) report that they are moderately or extremely familiar with the current DPP guidance document, whereas out of the 15 un-trained officers only 4 (27%) report similar levels of familiarity.

Comparing those with between 1-10 years experience, and those with 10+ years experience, there is little difference between familiarity with policy. In fact, those with more experience are less familiar with policies than those with less experience. 28% of those with between 1 and 10 years of experience reported they were unfamiliar with policies, compared to 30% of those with over 10 years experience. Likewise, a higher proportion of those with between 1 and 10 years experience reported being familiar with policies (54%) vs 43% for those with more than 10 years experience. So time, and vicarious learning, does not always equate to knowledge of policy and guidance. Whilst this may be mitigated by experiential learning and knowledge of guidance operationally (without having read any policy document), the view of some police officers surveyed by Fyfe, et al. (2014) was that experience is more important than knowledge of policy and guidance, it is a risk not being able to refer back to policies and procedures when making decisions about risk assessments. Within policing the National Decision Model is used to guide decision making, a key element of this model being to consider relevant policies (College of Policing, 2024) of which the local force policy and APP (2024) will be key.

#### 4.2.3 Usage of Information Sources

A Likert scale was utilised to establish the frequency practitioners utilise various sources of information to inform their risk assessment of missing children.

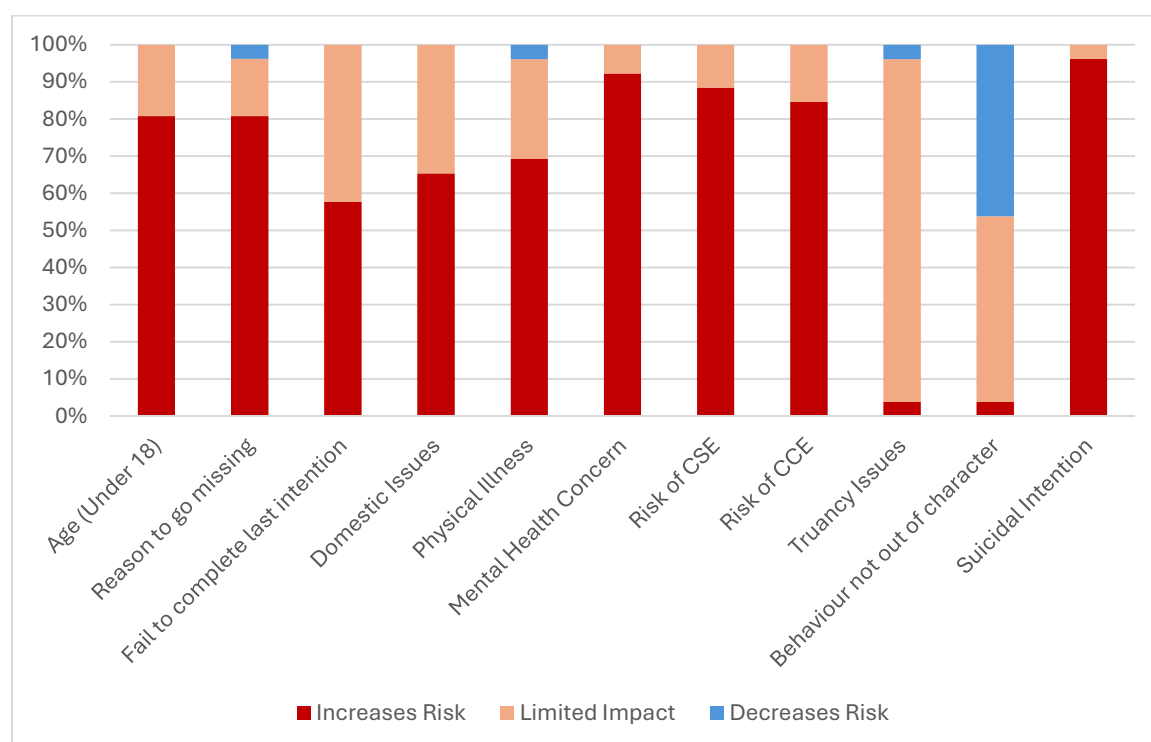
The highest frequently used sources are the information provided by the reporting person (held on the incident log), with the lowest two sources of information being from the police national database (that may hold information from other police services, if the child has resided out of force for instance) and the child protection register. The child protection register was said to be rarely, or never, used by 19% of respondents. With a further 23% stating they only use it 'sometimes'.

The overall picture demonstrates a tendency to favour internal local systems and information, with a potential under-utilisation of information from other agencies. This may be a result of the time children are reported missing (outside of office hours with limited access to information from other agencies), or the time a child is missing for, whereby that information is not gathered due to the short time they are missing. As discussed within the literature review chapter, Hayden and Goodship (2015) raised concerns that risk-pertinent information was not shared between agencies and Fox, et al. (2024) argued that police need to proactively search for this information. Clearly local systems are easier to access and provide faster access to information, but information from other sources and agencies may provide a more child-centred approach to risk assessment (Waring, et al., 2023).

#### 4.2.4 Vulnerability Factors

Participants were asked to indicate which of the below vulnerability factors they felt increased the risk associated to a missing person.

*Figure 2: Vulnerability Factors and their Impact on Risk Assessment*



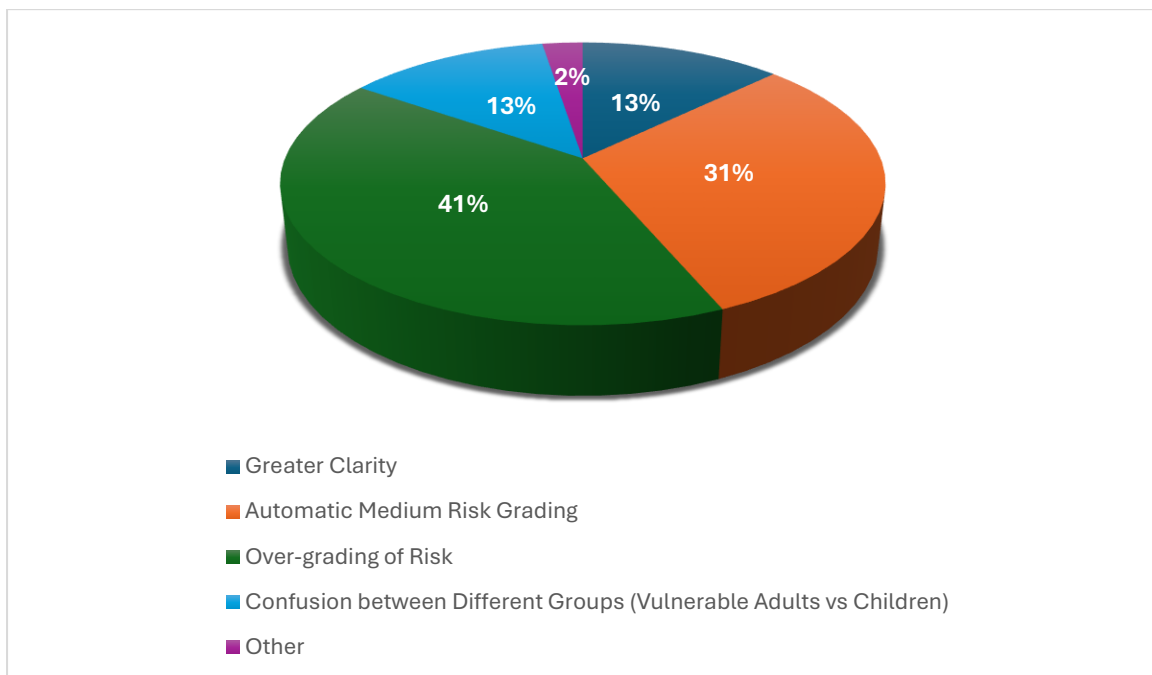
The top two factors that participants felt increased risk were suicidal intention (96.2%) and mental health concerns (92.3%). These were closely followed by exploitation concerns, where a risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) was deemed to increase risk by 88.5% of participants, and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) by 84.6%. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that behaviour not being out of character either decreased risk (46.2%) or had a limited impact on risk (50%), and likewise truancy issues (i.e. going missing from school) was deemed to have a limited impact on risk by 92.3% of participants. These findings are consistent with previous research regarding suicidal intention being the main indicator of a high risk grading (Phoenix, 2017) (Phoenix & Francis, 2023) and that high risk cases were usually where there was a likelihood of immediate harm (Shalev & Collie, 2024).

#### 4.2.5 Practitioner Views on Policy

Participants were asked for their views on the current DPP policy that any person under the age of 18 (any child) must be graded as medium risk or above. Participants were given options to choose from, with the ability to select multiple options, and given a free text area to respond if they wished. The options given were:

- Greater clarity in risk assessments for children
- An automatic reaction to grade children medium risk
- Over-grading of risk for some children
- Confusion or challenges when comparing risks across different groups (e.g. vulnerable adults vs children)

*Figure 3: Practitioner Views on DPP Policy*



Participant 5 opted to provide their own answer, stating that the inability to grade children as low risk also impacted upon resourcing, highlighting that resources may be better spent on higher risk missing persons or other policing areas, in line with the views of Doyle & Barnes (2020) who called for an evidence-based approach to risk gradings and that resources could potentially be diverted with no increase in risk to the missing person to better serve the public.

#### 4.2.6 Confidence to Amend FIM Gradings

Within DPP the FIM is responsible for the initial risk grading, which is then later reviewed by the response sergeant supervising the missing person enquiry. One area of vulnerability within this policy is a possible reluctance to alter that initial grading, if disagreed by the duty

sergeant and in the absence of vastly different information due to the initial risk assessment being conducted by someone holding a higher rank within the police service (a FIM being of inspector rank). To ascertain if this was a possible barrier, the question was posed to participants as to how confident they felt amending the initial risk grading by the FIM.

Of the 26 respondents 18 (69%) stated they were confident or very confident upgrading an initial risk assessment set by the FIM, whereas 12 (46%) were confident or very confident downgrading an initial risk assessment set by the FIM. There's a clear drop in confidence when downgrading an initial risk assessment, possibly indicating a reluctance to lower risk for fear of repercussions if harm does come to the missing person. Berry (2009) found that officers felt there was a blame culture, and would over-grade risk in some cases to avoid reprimand later if the incident resulted in harm. Heaton (2011) explains how this risk aversion causes operational limitations and can be driven through frequent reminders of negative outcomes.

Rank makes a difference however, within the survey were FIMs (who all stated they were confident altering an initial risk grading by another FIM), and a Chief Inspector (who stated they were confident either upgrading or downgrading a risk assessment by a FIM). However, for response Inspectors only 75% stated they were highly confident in altering a risk assessment (either by upgrading or downgrading) and for response Sergeants this drops further, with 62% being confident to upgrade a risk assessment, and just 46% being confident to downgrade a risk assessment. Considering the DPP policy lays the responsibility of assessing the initial risk assessment by the FIM with the response Sergeants, it seems they lack the confidence to alter the risk assessment, even when they feel it's necessary. Some further investigation into why this lack of confidence exists may be prudent to resolve the issue if the policy is to remain unchanged.

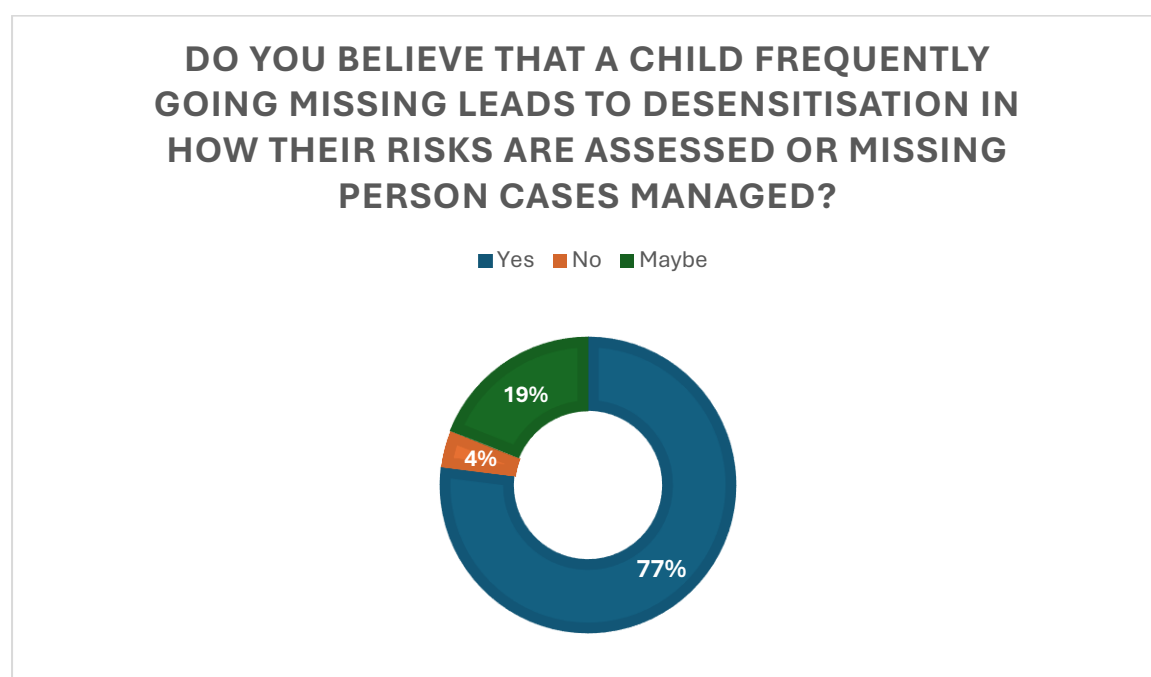
#### 4.2.7 Views on Desensitisation

The academic literature by Tansill (2021) previously referenced on page 11, suggests that there may be desensitisation of risk for repeat missing children. Respondents were asked

whether they felt this was the case, prior to being asked to assess the risk in scenarios designed to demonstrate whether this was the case or not.

Respondents overwhelmingly felt that a child frequently going missing leads to desensitisation in how their risks are assessed or their missing person investigation is managed.

*Figure 4: Views on Desensitisation*



Participants were asked to expand on their choice with qualitative feedback. A lot of participants stated that they felt that there was a possibility of becoming blasé about the risk for repeat missing children, with some stating that they try to not let it affect their handling of the incident, but that perhaps there was an unconscious bias (Participant 23). Others felt that where a child had been missing before and not been known to come to harm then the risk was in fact lowered. However, countering this opinion were some participants who felt that frequency of missing episodes should never impact the risk assessment, but rather inform the risk assessment using knowledge of vulnerabilities from previous missing episodes. Another participant felt that it was dependent on the risk assessor (Participant 26) and this view was shared by one participant who felt that sergeants were more likely to see repeat

episodes as lowering risk, whereas inspectors found this approach “frustrating” (Participant 21).

#### 4.2.8 Scenario Grading Exercise

The scenarios were created to understand whether there is any bias or desensitisation towards risk for repeat missing children, compared to first-time missing children. Two question sets were offered to participants to answer, both containing the same information about 5 missing children being reported to the police, the same ages, times of day, circumstances, and vulnerabilities. However, between the two question sets each scenario differed as to whether the missing child was being reported missing for the first time or had been reported missing previously. The participants were asked to select one question set and then review the scenario and provide a risk grading of either low, medium or high risk based on the definitions within the APP (2024).

The full scenarios can be found at Appendix A.

The results for each scenario, including when they were missing for the first time or as a repeat missing person are shown below:

*Figure 5: Scenario 1 - 14-year-old female with identified risk of CSE*

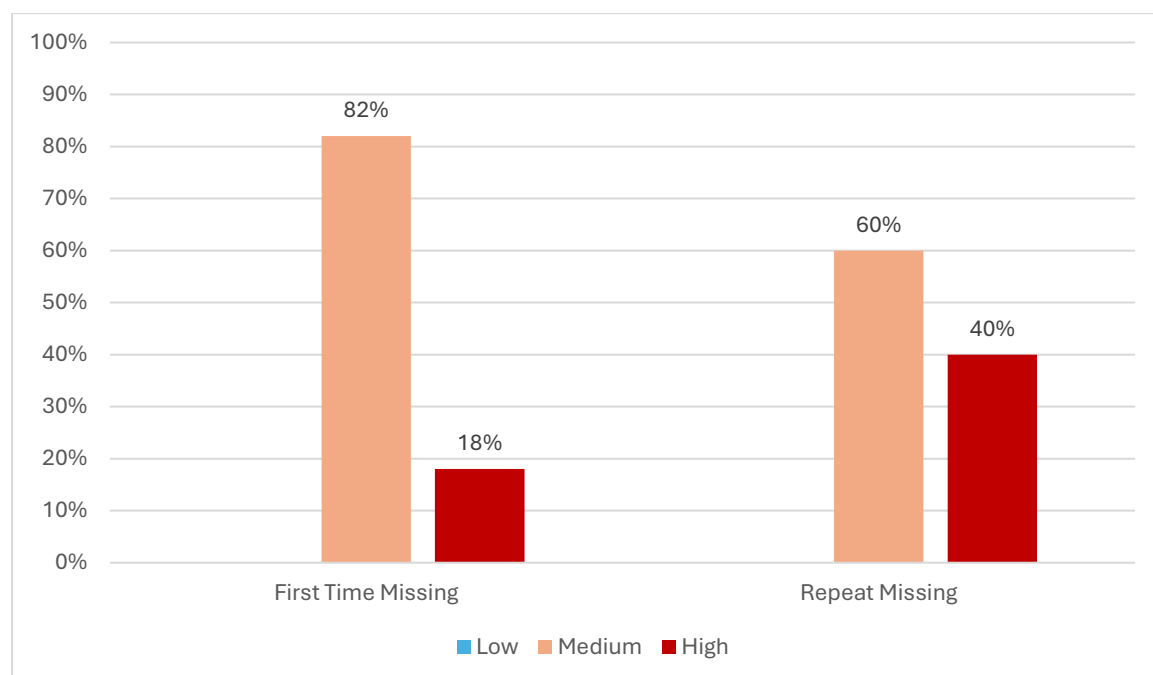


*Figure 6: Scenario 2 - 15-year-old male with reported domestic concerns*

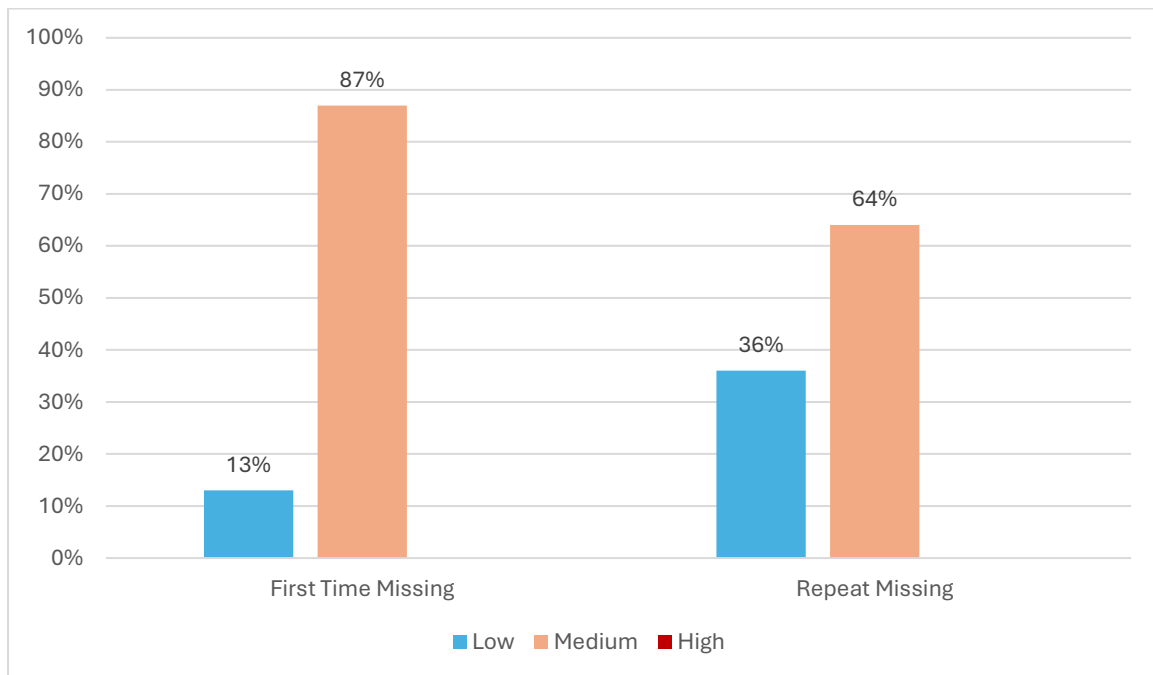


*Figure 7: Scenario 3 - 16-year-old female with no other reported vulnerabilities*

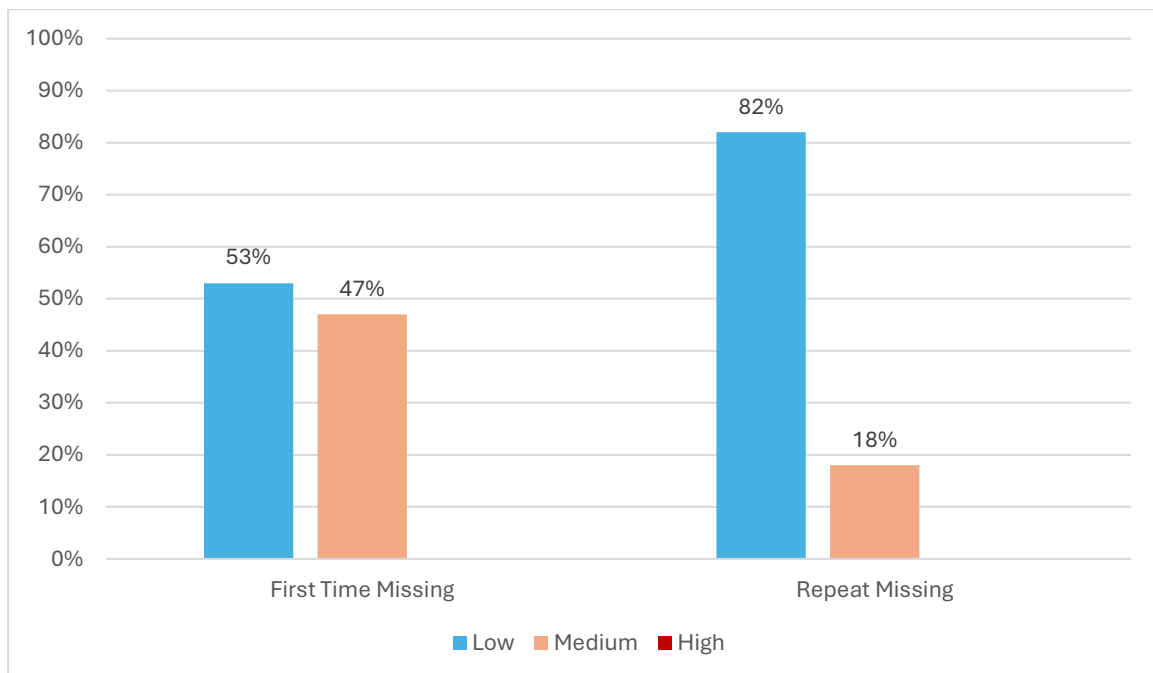


*Figure 8: Scenario 4 - 14-year-old male with identified CCE risk*

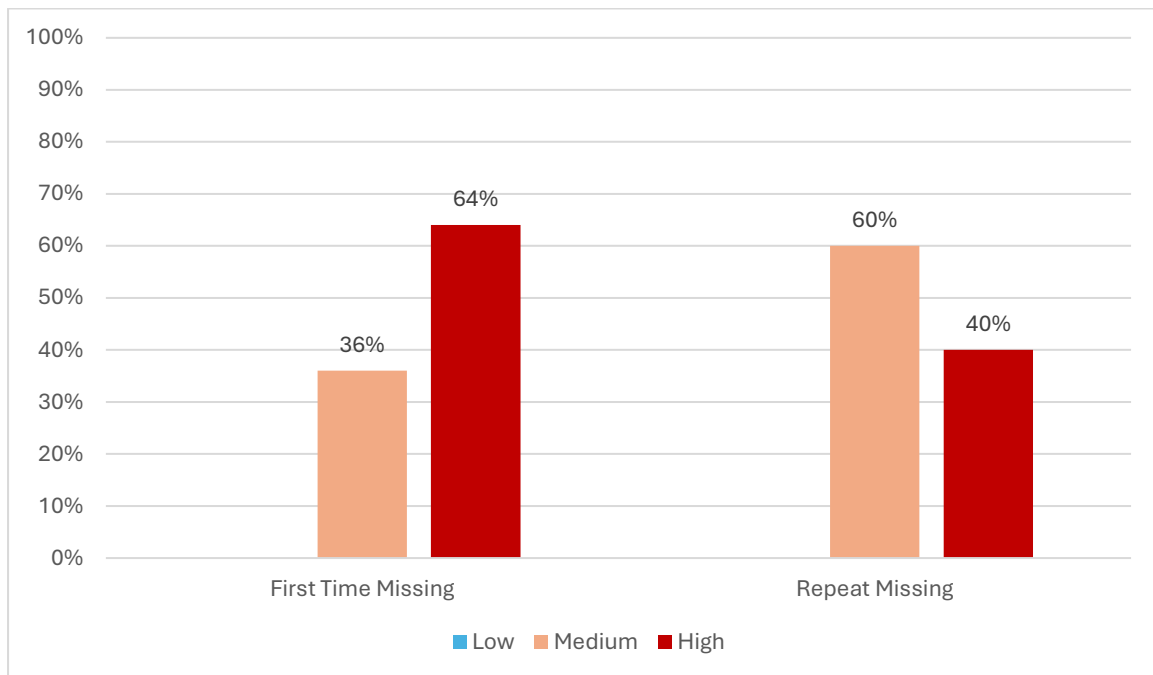
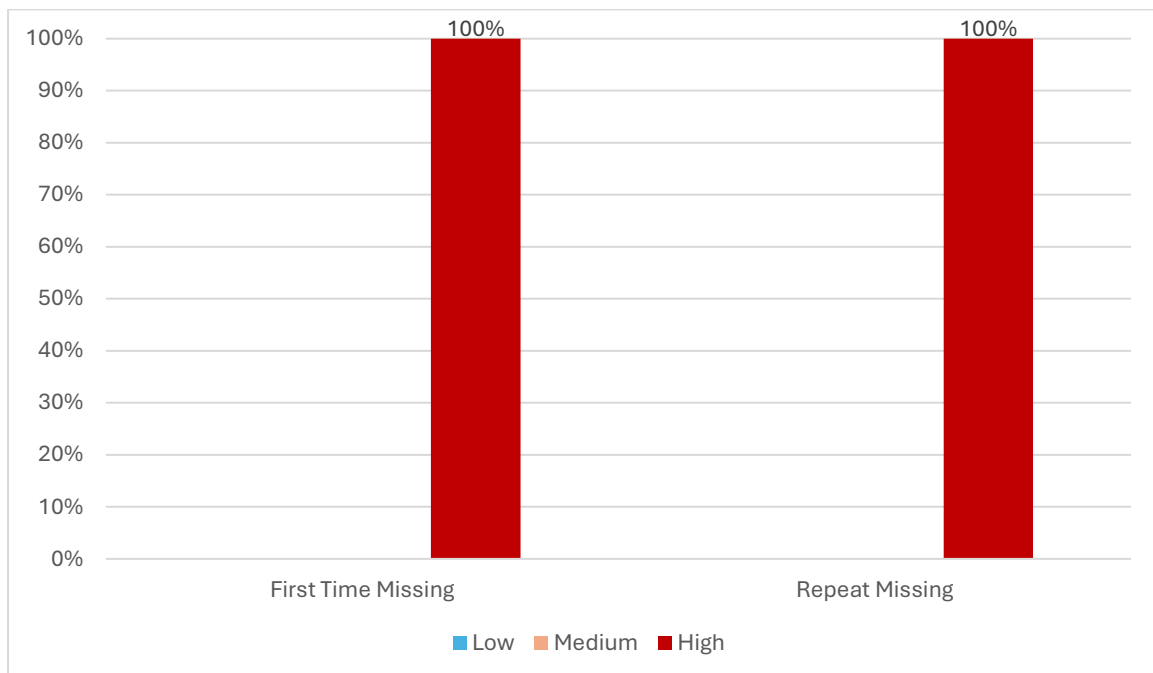


*Figure 9: Scenario 5 - 15-year-old male with suicidal intention*



The results from the study show that in most cases (3/5), being a repeat missing person means there is a tendency to consider the risk reduced, even where the circumstances and risks are the same. This is untrue where there is a risk of CSE apparent, as in scenario 1, whereby being a repeat missing person resulted in 22 percentage point (pp) increase in

likelihood to be graded as high risk, rather than medium risk. It is also untrue where there was suicidal intention, and all participants agreed that the risk was high. The percentage point change going from first time to repeat missing is shown below:

*Table 4: Percentage Point Changes between First Time and Repeat Missing Persons*

| Scenario                                        | Low Risk | Medium Risk | High Risk |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| <b>Scenario 1 – CSE Risk</b>                    | 0        | -22pp       | +22pp     |
| <b>Scenario 2 – Domestic Concerns</b>           | +23pp    | -23pp       | 0         |
| <b>Scenario 3 – No Reported Vulnerabilities</b> | +29pp    | -29pp       | 0         |
| <b>Scenario 4 – CCE Risk</b>                    | 0        | +24pp       | -24pp     |
| <b>Scenario 5 – Suicidal Intention</b>          | 0        | 0           | 0         |

Overall, this demonstrates a 54pp decrease in overall risk where the missing person is identified as a repeat missing person with no other change in circumstances, vulnerabilities or risks apparent.

Interestingly, the only scenario where there was agreement across all respondents was where there was an explicit suicidal intention, whereas between all other scenarios there was between a 22% and 29% disagreement between individuals regarding the risk that should be assigned. This perhaps furthers the argument presented on page 9 where Phoenix & Francis (2023) explained that suicidal ideation was the primary indicator of a high-risk grading. This was agreed by Doyle & Barnes (2020) who furthered this, evidencing that being suicidal was the biggest indicator of harm for missing persons.

#### 4.2.9 Further Insights

The questionnaire ended with three qualitative questions to gain further insights and provide opportunity for participants to share viewpoints on the topic that they had not been able to express through the questionnaire.

The first question asked whether the participant had any ideas for changes to the current response to missing persons within Dyfed-Powys Police. Multiple respondents proposed inclusion of “truant” within the Dyfed-Powys Police policy and guidance, with respondents explaining these should be classified as truants rather than missing, and responsibility shared between police, educational establishments and parents/guardians. One participant considers this should be further expanded to those missing from home, and they feel that unless there is an immediate risk Dyfed-Powys Police should not be so quick to classify someone as missing, and to allow for basic enquiries to be conducted prior to formal recording of a missing person (Participant 17). Two participants highlighted the significant time spent on missing person enquiries where parents are not conducting their own enquiries (Participant 3 and Participant 6)

Ten respondents felt that the current policy whereby children are automatically graded as medium risk should be re-considered to allow for low risk gradings to be utilised in certain cases. Another respondent felt that the definitions for high, medium and low risk were too rigid and suggested alteration of the definitions to allow a more balanced approach, or the inclusion of a further risk grading to further separate the three current risk gradings.

Another insight of note is that one Sergeant explained that they had previously asked for a missing person to be raised to high risk, they sought the FIMs approval to raise the risk to high and the FIM disagreed (Participant 14). Within the Dyfed-Powys Police guidance the Sergeant has the autonomy to raise the risk level without any ratification from the FIM and is in fact charged with reviewing the initial risk assessment conducted by the FIM. This may be a singular lack of awareness of policy but could perhaps indicate confusion in the policy and guidance that requires clarification.

When asked what the most significant challenges participants faced when applying the policy to assess risk for missing persons, many respondents felt they had a lack of access to required information. Some participants highlighted an inability to conduct PND checks, or not having access to the Child Protection Register out of hours. This seems to be the case

for looked after children, where social services may hold additional information on these children that would be central to a risk assessment.

Answering a question about additional tools, training or resources that would benefit the respondents in assessing and managing the risk for missing children, twelve of the respondents stated they wanted training either for the first time as some pointed out they had never received training and had taught themselves by reading policy or learning from others. Some requested annual refresher training on missing persons and specifically missing children and associated risks. One respondent felt further training on Adverse Childhood Experiences was required (Participant 1).

One consideration from a respondent was to utilise a tick-box based risk assessment tool, like the current risk assessment tool for Domestic Abuse Stalking and Harassment (DASH) (Participant 26). Another agreed that the current process was too subjective, and risk assessments lacked consistency (Participant 17). A tick-box based tool may be a viable option to reduce the discrepancy between risk assessments provided by respondents in the scenarios, with the inclusion of the ability to raise or lower the risk by a certain number of 'points' based on other factors. As one participant stated, the policy is "never going to cover all eventualities" (Participant 1).

## 4.3 Interviews with FIMs

### 4.3.1 Risk Thresholds

All three Force Incident Managers (FIMs) agreed that a high-risk missing person case involves either an immediate or serious threat of harm. Suicidal intent was cited by all as a key example in line with academic research suggesting suicidal intent was the primary indicator of high risk gradings (Doyle & Barnes, 2020) (Phoenix & Francis, 2023). However, views differed on whether immediacy must always be present. FIM 1 believed that a vulnerability alone (e.g. dementia) could justify a high-risk grading even without a time-critical element. FIM 3, conversely, warned that without immediacy, classifying too many

cases as high risk could dilute resources this aligning with the views of Doyle & Barnes (2020) that over-grading risk, or not using evidence based approaches, could dilute resource and distract from other critical work.

Under current Dyfed-Powys guidance, individuals under 18 cannot be graded as low risk. This was seen by all FIMs as limiting flexibility. FIM 2 remarked that truly low risk individuals are rare, while FIM 1 and FIM 3 suggested that introducing a lower category for truancy or curfew breaches might reduce unnecessary resource usage. FIM 2 opposed a low-risk category for minors, preferring such cases be handled as non-missing incidents, such as a “safety-welfare” call. This view opposes the APP (2024) which stresses concern for welfare categories should not be used in lieu of a missing person investigation.

#### 4.3.2 Sufficiency of Information at Initial Report

All FIMs highlighted the frequent lack of detail at the first point of contact, particularly with children in care. Often, third party reporters (such as teachers or carers) are unaware of the full context, such as history of going missing, exploitation risks, or mental health concerns. FIMs commonly compensate by assigning initial grades based on available information and then tasking officers to obtain further details for use in further risk assessments.

Looked-after children posed specific concerns. FIMs 2 and 3 described how carers often lacked basic knowledge, including age or key vulnerabilities. One example given by FIM 2 concerned two children going missing from foster care, and the foster carer could not provide the dates of birth for the children, just a “rough age” at the time of reporting, furthering the academic research suggesting inter-agency communication is poor (Hayden & Goodship, 2015).

When asked about the Child Information Form which is to be used across Wales for children in care (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2021), none of the FIMs had seen it used during a missing report. Instead, FIMs had to rely on previous police records and incomplete or ad hoc information provided by the caller. FIM 1 however, stated they will task risk-assessment

enquiries in line with Fox, et al. (2024) who argued the police are responsible for proactively filling in these information gaps.

#### 4.3.3 Subsequent Risk Reassessment

All three FIMs observed that once a case is handed over to local teams, supervisors are reluctant to re-assess risk independently. Sergeants and even inspectors often defer back to the FIM, sometimes unnecessarily. FIMs shared examples where they were asked to validate or change risk levels, even though the response sergeants and inspectors had more up-to-date information.

FIM 3 expressed that once a case is handed over, further assessments should fall to response supervisors who are in possession of the current facts. All FIMs felt that a cultural or training issue underpins this hesitation. While some FIMs try to push responsibility back, others noted that supervisors typically maintain the original grading. There was agreement that inspectors could be the right rank to manage subsequent risk changes, given parity with FIMs.

Concerns also emerged about unjustified upgrades to high risk. FIMs 2 and 3 noted that after exhausting enquiries under medium risk, officers might reclassify to high—not because risk had changed, but to access additional resources such as telephony data. FIM 3 warned that this misrepresents risk and reflects missed investigative opportunities earlier in the process.

#### 4.3.4 Additional Concerns and Themes

A recurring theme was the premature classification of some children as missing. FIMs acknowledged that while safeguarding principles require erring on the side of caution, many cases involve truancy with limited additional risk factors. FIM 1 and FIM 2 described delaying formal classification, using welfare checks initially. FIM 3 supported formalising this by creating a short grace period to allow for low risk gradings, or a distinct category for truants

to reduce demand but remain in line with APP (2024) which does not support the use of safety-welfare categories when a person is missing.

In terms of overall balance, the FIMs generally felt Dyfed-Powys Police are handling missing children cases appropriately. FIM 2 stated the force "manages it OK," while FIM 3 said the balance between safeguarding and efficiency is "probably right". Nonetheless, all FIMs believed improvements to efficiency are possible without compromising safety, with current policy and guidance being overly cautious in some cases.

FIM 2 described frustration at the over-reliance on police for non-police matters. They cited an example where carers refused to collect found children, placing the responsibility back on officers to convey them home. The view was that better agency collaboration and clearer expectations of parental or carer responsibility would help.

#### 4.3.5 FIM Interview Conclusion

The FIM interviews demonstrated strong consensus that they have limited information at the point of report, some constraints in terms of gradings available, reluctance of supervisors to re-grade risk levels, and some areas for efficiencies to be made.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Introduction

The research set out to examine the effectiveness of Dyfed-Powys Police's (DPP) current risk assessment process for missing persons – with a focus on repeat missing children. This concluding chapter synthesises the key findings of this research in relation to its objectives and the wider academic literature. It then presents specific recommendations for policy and practice, acknowledges the study's limitations, and identifies directions for future research.

The Objectives for the research were:

5. Outline the current risk assessment process used within Dyfed-Powys Police and compare with selected other police forces for missing person investigations.
6. Explore academic literature regarding risk assessment and associated risks with children who are reported missing repeatedly.
7. Critically analyse the current risk assessment process within Dyfed-Powys Police and evaluate its effectiveness in identifying risks for repeat missing children.
8. Recommend a risk assessment process and supporting guidance to enhance Dyfed-Powys Police's risk assessment and response to reports of repeat missing children.

### 5.2 Key Findings

#### 5.2.1 Objective 1: Current Process and Policy Comparison

A prominent finding is that, despite a national framework (APP), there are inconsistencies in how different police forces approach missing person risk assessments for children. The policy review revealed that DPP and its Welsh counterparts have notably varied procedures. DPP stands out by prohibiting low risk classifications for children: any missing person under 18 in DPP must be graded medium or high risk. Other forces show more flexibility – for example, North Wales Police allows use of any risk level for children (including low), and South Wales Police uses age-differentiated guidance with oversight by a specialised Missing

Persons Investigation Team (MPIT). The policy review also highlighted divergent approaches to truancy.

### 5.2.2 Objective 2: Insights from Literature

The scale and impact of missing persons in the UK is vast, imposing significant burdens on police resources and budgets. This scale of demand, combined with finite resources, necessitates that police maximise efficiency in missing person investigations whilst minimising risk. A recurring debate in the literature concerns the nature of risk assessment and the use of purely objective tools versus subjective professional judgment. The consensus emerging is that neither alone is sufficient; a hybrid approach blending evidence-based risk indicators with experienced-based judgement is preferable. This is particularly relevant as current police risk grading practices do not separate the likelihood of harm from its potential severity, leaving room for inconsistent subjective application. Many authors also noted insufficient training for officers conducting these assessments. Crucially, the literature highlights a paradox regarding repeat missing children: they are statistically more likely to face serious harm, yet in practice they often receive lower risk classifications than first-time missing children. Children in care are especially vulnerable – they are overrepresented among repeat missing cases and face high risks – but systemic failures in information sharing between police, social care, and caregivers impede effective risk assessment. Another insight is the emergence of specialist missing person units in some forces, intended to provide more consistent, child-focused handling of cases and better multi-agency engagement. These teams, where implemented, have indeed forged closer links with social services and often graded risk more conservatively while also reducing the volume of reports taken on by frontline officers. However, an unintended consequence noted was that such teams sometimes lengthened the time missing, which could inadvertently increase likelihood of harm. This raises an open question about whether such approaches are masking risk or managing demand more proportionately – a point calling for further research.

### 5.2.3 Objective 3: Evaluation of DPP's Process

The empirical findings from DPP largely echo the themes raised in the literature and expose specific strengths and shortcomings of the current risk assessment process.

A major finding is the lack of formal training among many officers responsible for risk grading. The consequence of this training gap was reflected in policy familiarity. This points to a risk that decision-makers might rely on habituated practices that diverge from best practice, underscoring the need for better training and dissemination of guidance.

Another critical issue was information accessibility. FIMs indicated that they often lack information for children in care reported missing, and survey respondents favoured using local systems to inform risk. Notably, a Child Information Form exists in Wales to supply police with key information on children in care when they are reported missing, but none of the FIMs had ever seen this form used in practice during a missing person report. These findings indicate that the multi-agency information sharing mechanisms are not functioning as intended.

The study also examined how DPP officers apply the risk grading policy in practice, especially given DPP's rule that no child can be low risk. The survey uncovered mixed views about this rule. While everyone recognised the intention to safeguard children, many felt it leads to over-grading in certain low risk cases. The FIM interviews lent further insight: all three FIMs agreed the inability to use a lower risk category for children limits flexibility, especially for cases like truancy or brief curfew breaches with no, or minimal, additional risk factors. The inability to grade as low risk may be causing cases to be incorrectly classified as 'safety-welfare' calls. Overall, both frontline officers and FIMs see merit in a more nuanced risk grading system for children allowing a more proportionate police response without compromising safety.

Evidence from the survey's scenario-based experiment reinforced the concern that repeat missing children may be treated as lower priority against objective risk factors. Respondents

were presented with matched scenarios where the only difference was whether the child had gone missing before. The results showed that overall being a repeat missing child within DPP means you are likely to receive a lower risk grading. Importantly, this bias did not appear when explicit suicidal intent was cited, and these cases were all assessed as high risk regardless of prior episodes, and a scenario involving clear signs of sexual exploitation saw higher risk grades if the child had been missing previously.

Another notable finding is the reluctance to re-grade initial risk assessments made by the FIM. The data showed this effect is most pronounced at the Sergeant level, which is problematic since Sergeants are often the ones tasked with reviewing the initial risk assessment. All FIMs interviewed noticed that local supervisors often defer back to them rather than re-assess independently. The FIMs attributed this to a training or confidence issue. They also observed instances where teams would escalate a case to high risk with an expectation that new lines of enquiry would be available, showing a possible lack of understanding of enquiries to be conducted at early stages of medium and low risk cases.

In summary, DPP's current risk assessment process for missing children faces challenges of consistency, desensitisation for repeat episodes, and difficulties with partnership information sharing. The research exposed areas for improvement, such as the need for better training and guidance for officers, more dynamic use of information from partners, flexibility to differentiate truly low risk repeat cases from high-risk ones, and cultural shifts to encourage honest risk re-evaluation (both up and down). The findings underscore that while DPP's approach has strengths (initial oversight from the FIM, a generally cautious stance on child safety), it can be enhanced to become more efficient and evidence-based without eroding the safeguarding of vulnerable children.

#### 5.2.4 Other Findings

Within the research it has become apparent that the risk grading levels given within the APP (2024) are not applied or adopted consistently amongst forces. Very low risk appears to be disregarded by many forces, suggesting the category may not be necessary. Medium risk

appears to be over-utilised, with a potentially vast spectrum of vulnerabilities sitting within this middle-ground. High risk is most often linked to immediate risk. Suicidal ideation is widely considered the quintessential criteria for a high-risk grading, which may fail to recognise that serious harm indicators, where imminency can't be proven, could also be high risk. It may be prudent for the College of Policing to consider the following amendment to the continuum of risk:

- Retain Four Risk Levels
- Eliminate the “Very Low Risk” Category
- Maintain “Low”, “Medium”, and “High” Categories with their current definitions
- Introduce a “Life at Risk” Category: This category will specifically denote situations where there is an immediate or likely risk of the loss of life (such as actively suicidal missing persons or someone lost in conditions where survival would be difficult).

This would remove underused categories and assist in classifying and differentiating levels of risk which currently appear to sit within one risk grading.

### 5.3 Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are made to improve missing person risk assessment processes and procedures:

- 1) Enhance Training and Guidance for Risk Assessors:** DPP should implement mandatory training (with regular refreshers) for all officers and staff who perform or supervise missing person risk assessments. Improved training will not only increase officers' confidence in making informed risk decisions but also promote a more uniform application of risk criteria across teams and shifts. Nationally, the College of Policing should review missing person training requirements and assist forces in implementing uniform approaches.
- 2) Review Current Risk Assessment Guidelines:** DPP should consider introducing a more nuanced grading option or protocol for missing children reports that objectively

present minimal risk. The research evidenced that treating every child as medium/high risk can lead to perceived over-involvement in cases like truancy or minor absences, potentially straining resources that might be better focused elsewhere and leading to desensitisation for repeat cases. A recommended change is to create a formal “truant” category or low risk grading procedure for specific scenarios (e.g. a child missing from school or home with no additional known risk factors) with parameters mirroring South Wales Police policy (only for a short number of hours and kept under review). This would involve recording such reports appropriately and in line with APP, but with shared responsibility placed on parents, schools, and care institutions to conduct initial basic enquiries. Ultimately, the aim is a proportionate response – protecting children at genuine risk while avoiding undue escalation for cases that, objectively, present lower risk.

- 3) Strengthen Multi-Agency Collaboration and Information Sharing:** DPP should work with local authorities, social services, and care providers to ensure critical information is available promptly when a child goes missing. One practical step is full adoption and implementation of the Wales Child Information Form. DPP should consider setting clear expectations with parents, schools, and care homes at the first point of contact regarding their role in missing episodes. Nationally, similar multi-agency protocols should be prioritised: the UK Missing Persons Unit and National Police Chiefs’ Council can advocate for consistent frameworks where education and social care sectors actively collaborate on missing persons prevention and information exchange. By improving data flow and joint accountability, police can make better-informed risk decisions, providing a more child-centred approach.

## 5.4 Areas for Further Research

While this study has provided valuable insights, it also revealed an area where further research is warranted to deepen understanding and guide future policy:

Specialist Missing Persons Units vs. Traditional Approach: Building on the literature's mixed findings, further research could investigate whether dedicated missing person units (like South Wales Police's MPIT) deliver better overall results. Key metrics might include time to locate missing children, recurrence rates, and qualitative experiences of children and carers. Crucially, research should explore whether the lowered risk gradings and reduced demand reported in such models truly reflect more efficient risk gradings and partnership working or whether they might inadvertently "hide" risk (for instance, by discouraging reporting).

In conclusion, this dissertation has examined the complex issue of risk assessment in repeat missing child investigations from multiple angles. Implementing or considering the recommended changes will help align risk assessment practices with the aim of this work: ensuring that every missing child receives an appropriate, timely, and effective response whilst maximising police efficiency. The aspiration is that both DPP and the wider policing field will take these findings forward, and that continued research will support ongoing innovation in this critical area of child safeguarding.

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## Appendix A – Scenarios for Risk Assessment Exercise

| No. | Scenario                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Question Set A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Question Set B                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | At 14:00hrs on Friday a 14-year-old girl is reported missing by her school and her mother. She left school at lunchtime and has not returned; her mother is at home and does not know her whereabouts. Her mother has flagged concerns about possible grooming, and she is known to spend time with older teenagers outside of school, recently being picked up by friends in their cars. DPP recently recorded a crime of sexual communication with a child after explicit images had been sent to the missing person. | The missing person has been missing 4 times in the last 2 months; in previous missing episodes she has returned home late in the evening of her own accord and has refused to say where she has been or who she has been with.                                                                                                               | This is the first time she has been reported missing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2   | At 22:30 on Thursday a 15-year-old boy is reported missing by his father. The missing person had argued with his siblings, and left the house on foot two hours ago, he won't answer the phone to family when they try to call him, and they do not know his whereabouts.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | This is the first time he has been reported missing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | He has been missing previously, under similar circumstances, whereby he returned of his own accord after 6 hours. In the return interviews he stated he went out to avoid further arguments with his family and whilst out he met up with friends.                                          |
| 3   | A 16-year-old female breaches her 20:00 curfew and is reported missing by her parents. She has no other reported vulnerabilities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | This is the first time she has been reported missing. Her parents state she had told them she was annoyed about having to come back at 20:00hrs, stating her friends all had later curfews.                                                                                                                                                  | She has been reported missing three times previously, the most recent being two weeks ago. In the previous missing episode, she voluntarily met police after they phoned her. She stated she had been in town with friends and expressed her annoyance that her friends have later curfews. |
| 4   | It is 01:00hrs, a 14-year-old male has been reported missing from his care home, having not returned for his 21:00hrs curfew. He has recently been a victim of criminal exploitation and was the victim of a stabbing two months ago, the suspects were believed to be exploiting him to run drugs for them. Carers have tried contacting him, but he is not answering his phone they have conducted some searches in town and have not located him. They do not know who he was meeting today.                         | He has been missing 8 times in the previous 5 months, the most recent being two weeks ago. The stabbing took place in one of the previous missing episodes. For the other 7, the return home interviews show he has refused to say where he has been, and he has been located by police in public spaces or returned home of his own accord. | This is the first time he has been reported missing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 5   | A 15-year-old male has left the home address, stating he is going to kill himself. He has left on foot and gone in the direction of a large, wooded area near his home. His parents have lost sight of him and contacted police. He is under CAMHS, and his parents state he has been arguing with his siblings recently.                                                                                                                                                                                               | This is the first time he has done this.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | He has been reported missing twelve times in the last two months. In previous missing episodes he has returned home of his own accord or been located unharmed by police.                                                                                                                   |

## **Appendix B – Blank Questionnaire Survey**

*The blank Questionnaire Survey can be made available upon request*

## **Appendix C – FIM Interview Plan**

### **1 - Introduction, background, and consent.**

### **2 - Risk Threshold Interpretation**

- 1) In your mind, what would constitute a high-risk grading for a missing person?

*Are there any triggers that would automatically make you grade someone as high risk?*

*Do you feel that severity and immediacy of harm are factors that influence a high risk grading?*

- 2) Within the APP four gradings (very low, low, medium and high) exist. Within DPP guidance only low, medium and high are used, and for persons under 18 only medium and high can be used. How do you feel this impacts your ability to accurately risk assess?

*Does it constrain your assessment, or does it aid you?*

*Do you feel very low should be an option available? Do you feel low should be an option available for persons under the age of 18? Any parameters for this?*

- 3) Do you feel any risk categories are overused?

*Why do you think this is?*

### **3 - Information Sufficiency at First Contact**

- 4) Do you feel you often have enough information available to accurately risk assess a missing child?

*What information sources do you use to assess the risk? Previous reports/gradings, intel, CPR, etc?*

*When children are reported missing from care, do you feel carers/foster parents know enough about the risks involved and share enough information?*

*Academic research indicates that police feel some arbitrary labels are given to risk, such as "high risk of exploitation" without any context behind it that allows police to assess the risk. Does this reflect your experience?*

*Under the Wales Safeguarding Procedures children in care should have a Child Information Form that details their risks which is handed on to any new carer for use if they go missing. Are these commonly used in your experience?*

### **4 - Views on Subsequent Risk Assessments**

- 5) After you hand the incident on to the response sergeant or inspector, DPP guidance says they are responsible for re-assessing the risk. The survey found that may response sergeants weren't confident in altering the risk assessment set by the FIM but others suggested they sought advice from the FIM in order to re-grade the risk – have you had experience of officers coming back to you to ratify their risk assessments?

*Do you have any feelings or views about who should re-assess the risk following the FIMs initial risk assessment?*

*Are there occasions where you think the risk assessment is altered unnecessarily after the initial risk assessment? Any examples?*

## **5 - General Views on Demand/Policy**

- 6) Do you think Dyfed-Powys Police respond well to missing children, considering a balance between risk and harm, and police efficiency?

*Do you feel we grade people as missing too quickly or at the right time?*

*Are there any amendments you would suggest to policy and guidance?*

*Around the world many different risk assessment categories are used – some countries use a 5-point scale, some use 2. Do you feel any additional risk categories would be of benefit, or just cause confusion? Do you feel a reduction in risk categories would be of benefit or cause additional demand?*

- 7) Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the topic?

## **6 - Conclusion**

## **Appendix D – Questionnaire Survey Results**

*Questionnaire Survey Results can be made available upon request*

## **Appendix E – Interview Transcripts**

*Transcripts of the interviews conducted with the FIMs can be made available upon request*